Spark of Hope

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Spark of Hope

by TallLiar

Summary

OJ's hotel has been absolutely BOOMING lately.

And that kind of success was... hard to manage, to say the least. Especially since OJ couldn't seem to find a good assistant to help out with things. He'd tried, sure, but all of them just... fell flat in one way or another.

So imagine his surprise when Steve Cobs, the CEO of Meeple Inc., offered to BUILD one for him.

Well... who was he to turn down the offer of a lifetime?

[Robot Paper AU! TW: Themes of implied/reference @bus3 will be scattered throughout the chapters.]

Notes

YEEEEP ANOTHER AU. ANOTHER ONE. SOMEONE STOP ME

hope this makes up for my last fic, sorry about that one gang <3

Also, this AU is co-owned with @lakeey10 and @m1lky.x4 on discord!! Y'all are awesome fr fr (they're also here on ao3!! Hi guys :])

Chapter 1: Greetings and Salutations

Chapter Summary

OJ receives the robot assistant he'd been promised by Meeple's CEO.

Their first interaction... does not go as planned.

"…Where's the damn on button for this thing?!-"

OJ had been fidgeting with this clunky heap of metal for what felt like *hours* now. Steve Cobs was a *CEO* of a *massive* company for crying out loud, how hard could it be for him to include instructions for his products?

He was the one that offered to manufacture a robotic hotel assistant for him. One that he promised would turn out to be absolutely *perfect.*

But no, it seemed like he didn't even have the decency for *that.*

OJ will admit, he'd always thought the guy was a bit… weird. Like the 'how-did-this-guy-ever-manage-to-start-a-company' kind of weird. But he knew better than to vocalise his opinion on that. It wouldn't end well for him, and he didn't really feel like having his thriving hotel business shut down right now.

OJ was on the verge of giving up and demanding a manual for the damn android…

…When it simply… powered on itself. Completely out of the blue.

If OJ was being honest… he was *speechless*. He expected the quality to be *good,* but *this*... this was on a whole other level. Each and every movement was completely fluid, the robot's exterior perfected down to the smallest details in his eyelashes. Of course he'd taken note of that before, but it was just… *different* seeing it all in motion.

And then it started to speak.

"Hello! My name is… P.4.P.3.R.! That stands for 'Pal For Permanent Free Rest'! How may I assist you today?"

OJ couldn't help but blink at the device. Well… all his theories about this robot being some sort of alien were just thrown out of the window.

It was *very* clear that Cobs only prioritised the bot's appearance. Its vocal cords were choppy, pixelated and so distorted they were barely comprehensible, even to him.

And what was he even going for with that acronym? God, Cobs was so uncreative when it came to names. *'Permanent Free Rest'?* With a name like that, it sounded more like he was trying to put OJ out of business.

There wasn't much he could do about it, though. He probably wouldn't actually *talk* to this robot often anyway.

"Ah… uhm, hello. So… would you mind giving me a little info on how you… like… work…?"

The robot took a few moments to take in that information, leaving the two in a moment of deafening silence. He wondered if he'd be able to get Test Tube to make some upgrades to his operational speeds-

…No, he could think about those sorts of decisions later. He had to focus.

- Processing…

- Done!

"Hello, Sir… Orange Juice. I was created with the intent of assisting you with any needs you may have surrounding the hotel and its residents. I can perform basic actions such as cooking or cleaning at much faster speeds than most objects could, allowing for you and your residents to have more free time to… enjoy life."

He noticed the pause. He noticed the way the robot's eyes flickered…

…And he couldn't help but wonder if there was more to him than meets the eye.

More that Cobs wouldn't want him knowing about…

"Oh… okay! Makes sense… so… how about a little test run?"

"Alright, then."

There was no delay this time. He wondered if what he was experiencing earlier was related to him having to load everything for his systems in…

"What do you require of me at the moment, Orange Juice?"

OJ breathed out a quiet sigh, biting his lip a little. He didn't know if this was the best idea… treating what was clearly a machine as a natural, biological object probably wouldn't go all that well for him… Soap always forced him to watch those movies on 'the rise of A.I' and all…

But he realised at that moment… that he didn't really care. If things went to shit, he'd blame it on the man that sold the android to him.

"…Please call me OJ."

“What?”

The robot blinked at him. An innocent sort of blink, not too far off from the kind of blink he’d always see Cherries giving him when he asked them about something they didn’t understand.

“OJ. Y’know, like, short for Orange Juice?”

“…Ah! An… acronym! Very… clever.”

He couldn’t quite pin-point the tone of that sentence, but it sounded a lot more life-like than anything he’d heard from the machine before. Like it was genuinely making an effort to praise him for the simplest things.

“Very well. I shall call you… O.J.”

OJ let his lips curl into a small smile, shaking his head.

“No- like- like all in one go. Like ‘Ohh-Jayyy’.”

“Oohhh…Jayyy…”

A chuckle from the robot broke the silence that’d formed between them. It was a happy, tender chuckle, filled to the brim with the light of a thousand stars.

…It sounded so… so *real.* So *raw,* like something an actual object might sound like.

Only… somehow… *prettier?* OJ couldn’t explain it, and he couldn’t find it in himself to try… so instead he just stared at the robot for a few seconds.

“…Huh.”

The grin on the robot’s face dropped after a couple moments, and its shiny, marble-like eyes locked onto him in an instant.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, I just… didn’t expect that reaction… do… do you… like… *actually* feel emotions?”

“Yes!”

When OJ didn’t reply, still too shocked from the revelation to say anything, the bot continued.

”Mr. Cobs built me using the same basic operating system as all other Meeple hardware. This includes the large range of MePhones, who all operate on the same highly-advanced emotional systems. The hardware is replicated and ported into every new device manufactured at the Meeple company-“

OJ rolled his eyes, letting out an irritated huff. He didn't need someone else talking his ear off about how *great* Cobs was, plenty of people did that already.

And judging from the way joy was slowly being drained from the android's tone the longer he went on about him, it wasn't a topic the bot enjoyed discussing either…

"Woahhh… slow down… uh… what was your name again?"

"P…4…P…3…R."

OJ shook his head again, a laugh tumbling out of his lips. Usually when it came to others misinterpreting his words, he was rather impatient with them…

But with this robot it was oddly… endearing.

"I didn't mean 'slow down' *that* literally, you know…"

And there it was. That flicker of concealed emotion appeared on the sheet's face again.

The way his eyes widened, if only for a split second, as if they were afraid of… some sort of *consequence*... like he was on the verge of being *punished*...

…OJ had only just met this robot, and he was already concerned for it. For how it was treated. What was *wrong* with him…?

"Oh, I- I'm so sorry about that, OJ! I promise I'll do a better job at interpreting the meaning of your words next ti-"

"Hey."

OJ didn't know what otherworldly deity possessed him at that moment, but…

…He reached out and grabbed the robot's hand, a sincere, gentle smile on his face.

"There's no need to be so stressed, okay? I'm not gonna lash out at you for every little thing. Everybody makes mistakes."

"But I'm not meant to make *mistakes.* I'm meant to be *perfect.* That is… a fundamental part of my programming."

…Why did that sound so… so *painful?* OJ understood where it was coming from…

…Where *he* was coming from…

But that… that wasn't *right.* To expect something to always work as expected 100% of the time. Not even the most brilliant inventions would work *all* the time, that would be impossible.

Just minutes ago, a perfect robot was all he could've ever dreamed of. A perfectly helpful assistant that could do no wrong, cause no problems, and followed his instructions to the

letter.

But now… with said robot actually standing in front of him, fearing failure like it would be the end of the world… he was starting to see things in a new light.

“Look… whatever your ‘programming’ is telling you… about being… *perfect*... just- ignore *all* of it. You shouldn’t have to measure up to Cobs’ impossibly high standards… or anyone else’s, for that matter.”

“But… but I’m-“

He pressed a finger to the robot’s lips, shaking his head.

“Shh… perfection doesn’t *exist.* We’re all ‘perfect’ around here, and you… you have the right to a life as much as anyone else does.”

That… that seemed to genuinely shock him. Like it wasn’t an answer he’d been equipped for, a scenario not considered in his lines of code.

Being *alive*...

What was it that made something *alive?*

For the longest time, OJ believed he’d never be able to find a concrete answer.

But in that moment… while the bot’s eyes shook in astonishment… he noticed something that made the answer clearer than ever.

That *spark.*

Whether it was a fleeting flash of electricity, or a reflection of the hotel’s lamplight present in his eyes…

It was that *spark* that made something alive. That made *anything* alive. OJ was certain that no other motionless item in existence could replicate something so magical.

“…Paper.”

“What?”

He dropped his hand from the robot’s mouth, wondering if he’d somehow heard him incorrectly. The proud smile on his face told him he hadn’t.

“Earlier… you asked me what my name was. I… I’ve decided that it’s Paper.”

…Oh…

Paper, huh? That was a cute name for him.

OJ couldn’t believe what he was feeling right now. He felt so… so oddly *content.* Seeing Paper standing in front of him, his cold, metallic hand clasping tighter around his own…

…He wouldn't really want to be anywhere else in the world right now. He wanted to learn everything he could about this little paper angel… to support him and help him grow… not to treat him like a *slave,* as he imagined Cobs would've.

"Well it's nice to meet you, Paper."

Chapter 2: Day 1

Chapter Summary

> OJ takes Paper on a grand tour of the hotel, and realises Paper is more observant than he was initially prepared for.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Alright, so… right now, we're in my bedroom. I figured it'd be best to activate you here, away from the… *commotion*... of the rest of the hotel. Plus, I'm pretty sure if Yin-Yang or Test Tube caught sight of you, you'd never see the light of day again."

Paper's eyebrows furrowed in confusion, a pinch of worry scattered across his features. He opened his mouth, most likely to comment on what he'd just heard, but quickly shut it when he realised OJ had to say.

"Anyhow, if you'll follow me, I'll show you around the hotel! That way, you'll be able to get the hang of how things work around here. Sounds good?"

"…Yes, that seems logical."

And with that, OJ walked over to his front door, swinging it open and gesturing for Paper to follow.

Paper realised that OJ's room was on one end of a very long, narrow corridor of rooms, and Paper followed as the hotel manager led his new assistant down the hall.

"Alright, I'll start with the residents and their respective rooms. On your left you'll find Fan and Paintbrush's room. Paintbrush can be… a bit hot-headed, but they mean well. And if I were you, I'd stay as far away from Fan as possible, he's a bit… invasive… and that's Tissues and Trophy's room right next to theirs, both of which I paired together because they're absolutely insufferable-"

Paper hung onto each and every word OJ poured into his ears, eager to learn more and more about each and every object that lived here. He couldn't really put it into words, but… it was all just so *intriguing* to him. Learning about each and every complex individual that lived here… it somehow made the entire place feel that much more *alive*. It was a feeling completely foreign to him, so used to the sterile, automated machines back at Meeple headquarters.

It was also strangely… *comforting* to walk around the hotel with OJ like this. Listening to him talk his ear off about a safe space he was clearly incredibly passionate about.

He came to the conclusion that OJ generally made him feel… safe.

It was probably just due to the fact he was his boss, though. And the kindness OJ had shown him earlier…

In that moment he realised he wanted to find a way to make it up to him, somehow. Logically, one should receive what they provide, shouldn't they?

"…And that room on your right is-"

"OJ?"

OJ suddenly stopped right in his tracks, turning to face the source of the voice. It was a short pair of cherries, connected by an emerald green stem. Both pairs of eyes were clearly fascinated with what they were seeing, walking up to the two with a wide grin.

"Oh! Uh, hey Cherries, this is Paper! He's my new assistant for keeping the hotel afloat, and he's-"

"A robot?!"

"Like an actual, *real* robot? No tricks?!"

Paper chuckled a little at their assumption, nodding along with a small wave.

"That is correct. I am… Paper, and by definition, a robot."

That answer seemed to excite the pair even more, gasps escaping both of their mouths, in perfect sync. The right cherry was the first to speak up, amazement and awe clear in the tone of his words.

"Oh that's really cool! I'm Cherries!"

"Yeah! Are you immune to pain?"

"Do you short circuit in water?"

"What about your-"

OJ ruffled their leaves a little, rolling his eyes at their enthusiasm.

"Boys, boys, calm down! It's his first day here, we don't wanna overload him with questions."

"Mm… I guess that's fair..."

Paper would admit, he didn't really mind the overload of questions. He found the child to be quite… endearing. Assuming he was a child, anyhow.

It was good to know someone was just as interested in learning about him as he was to learn about the hotel, and what his new life here would be like…

Because so far? He was *loving* it. Everything seemed to slot perfectly into place, and he wouldn't have it any other way.

"Well… I'll see you around, Mr. Paper, right?"

"Of course."

And with one last smile, he and OJ were back on track, waving the two goodbye. OJ giggled a little to himself at their antics, rolling his eyes.

"Little rascals… they seem sweet and innocent at first, but just you wait until you have to deal with their prank shenanigans 24/7…"

It was clear the words held no real malice, spoken in a warm, almost affectionate tone.

"I am looking forward to working with them. Just like every other resident in the hotel."

"Of course you are…"

They managed to get another five or so steps in before running into someone else, conveniently stepping out of their room the moment OJ reached it.

"Oh, hey there OJ! I was just about to start on cleaning and-"

She stopped mid-sentence when she noticed Paper behind him, her eyes widening a little in surprise.

"Who's this…?"

The glass of orange juice suddenly tensed up a little, about to open his mouth to explain when Paper beat him to it, resorting to his default explanation that'd been so thoroughly coded into him.

"Hello! I am Paper, created with the intent of assisting OJ with any needs he has surrounding the hotel and its residents. I can perform basic actions such as cooking or cleaning-"

The soap container suddenly sucked in a deep gasp, her eyes widening as she pointed an accusatory finger at him.

"CLEANING?!"

Paper blinked at her for a few minutes, perplexed by her reaction.

"Are you trying to *REPLACE* me? Just waltz right in here and steal my job?!"

OJ was quick to interject, stepping between the two and holding up his hands in a pacifying manner, trying to calm the outraged woman down.

"No, no, Soap, it's not like that! He's not stealing anyone's job, he's here to help out with little stuff! C'mon, you've *gotta* admit you're overwhelmed sometimes with all the…

cleaning… you do around here…”

Soap still seemed somewhat unconvinced, squinting her eyes at Paper for a few agonising seconds before shrugging it off.

“Seems fair, I suppose… you’re too cute to be an evil A.I. sent to doom us all, like in all those movies."

Paper breathed out a breath of relief he didn’t know he was holding, a newfound smile on his face.

“So, you work here too?”

She nodded along to his question, pointing at a sponge with her free hand. He didn’t register that she was holding it until now.

“Sure do! Name’s Soap, and… what was yours again?”

“Paper.”

“Right, Paper! Nice to meet you.”

His smile brightened ever so slightly, nodding along to her words.

“It is nice to meet you as well.”

“Well… I’ve really gotta get to cleaning… I hope Bomb doesn’t trash the room while I’m gone again… I’ll see ya later!”

“Indeed. I will… see you later.”

And so, he and OJ continued walking down that corridor. Paper met a few other residents along the way - a laid-back and respectful microphone, a sarcastic grey coin and a salmon balloon… all completely and utterly different and intriguing in their own respective ways.

The longer it went on, the less it felt like an actual tour and the more it felt like… just getting to know everyone here. Almost like he was actually starting to make *friends.*

OJ was… strangely quiet throughout the rest of the trip, only pointing out certain rooms and who stayed where, or where basic things like the kitchen and reception were… but Paper assumed that the silence was just a byproduct of the repetitiveness of their journey. Or maybe it was just that OJ wasn’t all that talkative in general…

By the time they’d finished their tour, Paper noticed that stars were starting to poke out of the dark blue blanket he’d learnt was the sky.

He wasn’t used to being able to see the stars out at night: he’d usually be forced to power down relatively early back at Meeple, only conscious for short slices of time each and every day where he’d gotten used to the peach-coloured hues outside each and every window. So

getting to witness their beauty like this… it was just one of the many things he was grateful for here.

He felt attracted to the lobby's window like a moth to a flame, resting his arms on the windowsill as he analysed each and every speck of dust that shone above him.

"You a fan of stargazing?"

Paper jumped at the sound of OJ's voice, backing away from the window in embarrassment.

"Oh! No, I was just leaving-"

"Hey, it's alright. The stars are pretty beautiful, I get it."

He walked over to the window, resting his arms on the windowsill, and Paper slowly let himself return to doing the same.

It was so… peaceful. A welcome break from all the craziness that'd been thrown at him that day. Sure, he wouldn't have traded his first meetings with everyone for the *world,* but… this was nice too.

And after a few seconds of silence… of time to truly *think* about the day… Paper realised something.

"OJ? May I ask you something?"

OJ turned to face him, laughing a little at his question.

"Paper, you don't need to *ask* to do things. You can just… do them."

It took Paper a moment to process those words.

It was… difficult to swallow all that OJ was telling him today. It was the polar opposite of how Cobs would treat him, always demanding that he comply with each and every one of his orders and only speak when spoken to…

…It was better not to think about that right now.

"…But I don't want to step out of line or upset you-"

"Come on, Paper, didn't we talk about this earlier? I'm not going to lash out at you over things like that. The worst I could do is calmly tell you if you actually upset or annoy me in any way."

How could someone be so forgiving? So humble, and so patient?

He wondered if there'd ever be a possibility of him understanding OJ… he just seemed like such an unusually caring person around Paper. Did he treat all the residents this way?

It bothered him that OJ's behaviour was something he couldn't understand. Something he couldn't make *sense* of. This wasn't how things were supposed to be, was it?

"…That we did."

"Mhm, exactly. So… what did you want to ask me?"

He'd gotten so lost in his train of thought that he'd almost forgotten, letting out a quiet hum of acknowledgement as he spoke up.

"After getting to meet everyone today… I realised there was a certain pattern in the residents' room arrangements."

"Oh?"

OJ seemed somewhat interested in what he had to say now, a small smirk forming on his face.

"They're all arranged in pairs. Usually ones with some sort of meaningful connection; like the condiment shakers, or the prankster twins and the balance of opposing forces. There are some exceptions, yes, but that is the general trend."

"And…?"

"Well… I couldn't help but notice that you do not share your room with anyone. Why?"

It was quick. Barely noticeable. But…

OJ's smile dipped, if only for a millisecond or two. But it was a motion that Paper's trained, diligent eyes caught in an instant.

"Well… I just prefer the solitude, I guess. It- it helps me plan things out, y'know? Nobody to distract me in there, haha…"

"…I see."

The two stood in silence for a few moments, the only audible noise being the chatter of the residents in the floors above them.

And it remained that way, until OJ turned away from the window, sighing to himself.

"Well… I'm gonna head out."

"To bed?"

"Uh… yeah, yeah, sure."

There was something off about his response. Why was OJ suddenly so out of it? Was it about what he'd said? Paper assumed he was only pointing out the obvious.

He started walking off in the direction of the stairs, before turning back to face Paper.

“Oh, right, your charging station’s in the spare room I showed you earlier. It’s in that box tucked away at the back. You can start helping around the hotel and managing stuff tomorrow.”

“Noted.”

OJ nodded along at Paper’s response, heading up the rest of the rest of the steps.

It was rather late…

…OJ had been so thoughtful and kind to him… and yet clearly had *so* much on his plate. Running a hotel all on your own for so many years couldn’t possibly be healthy…

He wondered if OJ had *any* free time at all. Any time to… *enjoy... life.*

Did he have any time to himself, where he could spend time with his friends? Did he even *have* any friends? How lonely *was* he?

It was something Paper couldn’t stop thinking about.

But then… then he looked at the clock, and was struck with an idea.

11:59PM...

OJ said he’d start helping out around the hotel *tomorrow,* didn't he?

Chapter End Notes

does this count as a cliffhanger? baby's first cliffhanger I think. Over 97K words and like this is my first cliffhangers wow that's impressive

Chapter 3: Breakfast Banter

Chapter Summary

OJ learns more about what Paper is capable of, and Paper discovers a part of himself he didn't know he was missing.

Chapter Notes

guys I swear this chapter's good I just suck at summaries and titles

AAAALSOOOO YEP 15 CHAPTERS!!! strap urselves in gang this gonn be a fun ride

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first thing OJ realised when he woke up the next day was that he was snuggled comfortably under the covers of his bed, a cork in his glass as the first few streaks of sunlight poked out from the sliver of empty space provided by the gap in his window's curtains.

So, of course, he immediately assumed the worst.

As soon as he regained full awareness of his surroundings, he shot right up out of his bed, popping his cork out and pacing around his room in an attempt to recall what'd happened last night…

After his talk with Paper, he headed back to his office and finished up responding to a couple of emails… and he was *fairly* certain that he'd passed out in his office chair, too tired to make his usual 2am coffee.

So how the *fuck* did he end up here? One glance at the clock on the wall told him it was 7 in the morning, so he already knew that he'd overslept.

God… this was a *nightmare.* One he needed to get to the bottom of, *immediately.*

He sped over to the door of his room, pushing it open without a sound… and what he saw when he looked out into the hallway made his heart leap out of his chest.

It was absolutely *spotless.* The walls were completely smooth and brilliant, with the stripes of yellow and orange paint on the walls somehow appearing all the more vibrant, as if someone had gone over them with another paint job. Even the floors looked brand new, the velvet carpet beneath his feet having lost each and every stain or speck and dust that he and Soap had come to expect would just always be there.

He continued walking down the halls at a much slower pace, just taking in how… clean and tidy everything was… it seemed practically impossible.

Maybe… If the *hallways* were so clean…

He rushed over to his office, and the sight he was met with made his jaw *drop.*

The messy stacks of bills and fees that once littered his desk had now been arranged into simple, perfectly neat piles. That wasn't even mentioning that his office, like the hallway, was completely spotless.

What the *hell* had happened while he was asleep? Did someone come in here and do his job for him?

...If his office was so tidy and not at all like he remembered... that meant that someone was in here... and they probably carried him to bed...-

Between this and the peaceful awakening he had moments ago, he had to wonder if he was dreaming right now.

It sure felt like he was living in a dream. It almost took him back to the days where the hotel was brand new; times when there was not a single scratch on the floors, when there were no Season 2 or even occasionally Season 3 contestants to worry about…

Then… he passed Paper's room. The room he'd allocated for him during the tour…

He was about to head into the room to wake him up, but something held him back.

What if Paper wanted to have a little lie-in on his first day? He should still be treated as a resident here… and he was used to going through morning chores alone.

But then he shook his head, sighing to himself. What was he *thinking?* Paper was a *robot,* 'sleep' was probably about as simple as waiting for his battery to reach 100%.

With that thought, he pushed the door open, expecting to see Paper peacefully sleeping in the station against the wall…

But no. He was nowhere to be seen. And that room, oddly enough, was the only place he'd encountered so far that looked the exact same as it did the night before, no touch-ups done whatsoever.

Did Paper have some sort of underlying code that automatically disconnected him from the station if his battery was full or something?

…Wait.

Oh.

Now it all made sense. The impeccable management, the clean hallways, the fact that Paper was nowhere to be seen… how did it take him so long to figure things out?

He rushed out of Paper's room, heading downstairs as he frantically looked for the robot. There was no *way* that *he'd* done all of this, right? But what other explanation *was* there?

He knew his way around the hotel better than anyone else. So it wasn't really a surprise when he found Paper almost immediately… and then he completely froze in shock, paralysed by the sight before him.

Paper's right arm was flipping eggs over a stove, while the other was extending *far* out of his usual socket, grabbing ingredients and supplies scattered throughout the room and placing them in their respective locations. When Paper's right arm had finished a flip, it extended towards the right side of the kitchen, managing the last of the scrubbing the floors with a sponge. It almost looked like he had a pair of absurdly precise tentacles… he had no clue Paper could even *do* that.

He was almost *scared* to approach him. He didn't know why, but the sight of an object being so incredibly efficient… it made him feel a little *intimidated* , even if he knew Paper had probably been programmed for stuff like this…

Still, he pushed on, approaching Paper from behind and lightly tapping his shoulder.

The robot responded immediately, his eyes drifting over to OJ with a smile.

"Good morning, OJ."

"Morning to you too…"

He mumbled, still somewhat in a daze, before continuing.

"Paper, what… what is all this?-"

"Well, your instructions were for me… help out around the hotel. The next day from when you had given said order."

"And? I meant that I was going to give you a hotel management briefing, and you'd do little chores around the place… not… *all this!"*

He gestured to the kitchen around them, and Paper's lips curled up into a *smile.* A small, barely noticeable, almost *smug* smile, but it was one that caught OJ's attention immediately.

"My programming did not take that into consideration."

"So- so what did-"

And then his eyes widened a little as it all clicked into place.

"…Have you been managing the hotel *SINCE MIDNIGHT?!"*

"Yes. Yes I have."

He stated it like it was a completely normal fact, still simultaneously flipping and plating eggs, all while sorting through ingredients in the rest of the kitchen. When he finished scrubbing, he gently dropped the sponge into a bucket.

“Wha- aren’t you *tired?”*

“My battery levels have not depleted just yet. Everything is well. I was simply… following orders.”

OJ couldn’t explain how or why, but… he somehow felt like there was *more* to it than that. More that Paper wasn’t telling him.

But the excuse was so *simple,* so perfectly straightforward and *logical,* that he couldn’t find a way to poke any holes into it. After all… that’s what robots did, wasn’t it? Followed instructions they were given down to the letter.

“I… I guess that’s… technically true…”

He sighed to himself, admitting defeat. Paper’s quiet hum of victory didn’t go unnoticed by him either. But he couldn't figure out Paper’s true motives for working *so* hard, *all night*...

Something else clicked for him in that moment, too, his face flushing a shade of light pink in embarrassment.

“…Wait did you… *carry* me into bed?-“

There was about a millisecond of time where Paper paused in his activities, most likely processing the simplest way to answer his question.

“…Yes. I did not want to wake you…”

“Oh. Oh, okay…”

OJ felt like he should’ve been freaking out about that more… but he knew that it was likely just a quick, automated response, and it was nowhere near as insane as the rest of what Paper had done that night. It shouldn’t be something he needed to worry about too much, right? Paper clearly didn’t think much of it, anyhow.

He tapped his fingers together, in a rhythmic motion, trying to think of something else to steer their conversation towards.

“So… what are you making?”

“Breakfast.”

OJ rolled his eyes, sighing with a slight grin on his face.

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

“…Eggs and bacon on toast. For you.”

That… caught him off guard a little. Paper was making breakfast for *him?*

“You uh… you *really* don’t need to go through all the effort to do that…-“

“But all organic objects have to eat to survive. Usually, 3 meals a day, or else they’ll start to feel-“

“No. I meant that you don’t have to make breakfast *for* me. I can make my own breakfast…”

Paper stared at him for a few agonizingly long seconds, before shrugging at him.

“I do not mind doing it myself. To give you… more time to relax. To enjoy life.”

…Oh, that… that was… honestly really… sweet…? He didn’t know how to respond to that piece of information, so he just decided to sit down at the table and wait for Paper to finish.

Soon, every ingredient was back where it belonged, and a steaming plate of eggs, toast and bacon was sitting in front of him.

He plunged a fork into the toast, cutting it off and shoving it into his mouth.

The taste was impeccable, melting off his taste buds with its delicate, savoury crunch and texture. But he supposed he should expect that, right?

“This… this is really good…”

“I am glad you enjoy it. I was not sure if you… would like the breakfast meal I had prepared.”

“Oh no, you don’t need to worry about that… I’ll eat basically anything.”

…He’d gotten very used to stuffing down whatever was in the cupboards for breakfast if there wasn’t anything readily available, but Paper didn’t need to know that. The machine nodded, humming to himself.

“Well… I suppose I will get started on the other residents’ me-“

“Woahhh… this is… *incredible…”*

Soap walked into the kitchen, spotting Paper working at the stove, approaching him from behind with a smile.

“How did you find the time to clean up *EVERYTHING?* Teach me your ways!”

OJ let out a muffled hum, swallowing another forkful of bacon and toast before speaking again.

“He stayed up *all night* working on everything…”

She let a sharp, loud gasp escape her throat, turning back to face Paper again.

“All. *NIGHT?!”*

Her yell was layered with a cry of sympathy, now seizing the robot by the shoulders and looking into his eyes. Her tone suddenly shifted, her eyes squinting as if she could stare into the back of his head.

“You are going to sit down besides OJ and let me finish up here. Got it?”

Her voice was stern enough to get him to comply, giving her a slight nod.

“Yes ma’am…”

“Good.”

He took a seat besides OJ, just… observing Soap. The way every resident behaved still fascinated him, and as more and more objects started joining them at the table, clamouring to get their hands on plates of whatever kind of food they liked… he couldn’t help but make a few mental notes on each one.

Some residents like Cheesy or Cherries were fans of pancakes; which both made sense, given their lighter, more carefree personalities.

Others like Pickle or Microphone were more laid-back, gladly taking a bowl of cereal while happily chatting with their friends.

Then, of course, you had Salt.

He did not want to think about remembering Salt’s ideal breakfast order.

When every object was seated at the table… it was nice to just… relax a little, losing himself in the busy chatter of Hotel OJ.

Until one of them spoke out to him.

“So… you’re the new robot assistant OJ was talking about? Paper, right?”

He turned to face the source of the voice. It was a red fan with a friendly smile on his face.

“Yes… that is me.”

“Ah! I’m Fan, and this is Test Tube.”

Fan pointed to the chair beside him, where Test Tube waved at Paper with an equally warm smile.

“It’s nice to meet you both.”

“You too! God… I- I have so many questions, and I need to update the blog, I-“

He was about to launch into another ramble when he noticed the way Test Tube was looking at Paper.

“Wow… I can’t believe you’re a *Meeple* product. You clearly had so much thought and care put into your design and emotional systems… not like the newer MePhones we’ve been seeing recently.”

Paper let out a quiet hum, nodding along to her words.

“That’s… interesting… I never really got to interact much with the other MePhones, so I always assumed we were all equally as advanced. Though Cobs always said I had to be *perfect,* so… maybe that has something to do with it?”

Test Tube seemed to consider his answer for a moment, clearly deep in thought.

“I’m surprised with how seriously he took making OJ an assistant. You know, he’s *not* exactly the biggest fan of us-“

Somewhere far across the table, a knee slap was heard.

How strange.

“…Ever since the whole ‘Battery incident’.”

“The what?”

Paper tilted his head a little at the pair, now invested in what they had to say. Fan was the first to speak up.

“Yeah… back in Season 2, we went to his headquarters to bring a battery back for our host-“

“Your *what?”*

Fan opened his mouth to launch into a rant about Inanimate Insanity, and who MePhone4 was, and everything that’d ever happened on the show… but a hand on his shoulder told him he should probably keep this brief. They were only eating breakfast after all.

“…Never mind that doesn’t matter. But anyway, we were getting a battery for another MePhone, but Cobs was super interested in this egg I had. He wanted it really badly, like-*really* badly. He said it could ‘change the future’ and all… but I refused. And after that, we stole the battery.”

Paper’s eyes widened a little at that. So the hotel residents and Cobs had… bad history together?

“Oh… that certainly is interesting.”

“…Of course, I later learnt that he wanted the egg because it was actually part of an alien species, the Shimmers, who-“

“Fan…”

He looked up at Test Tube again, wearing an amused expression, and laughed to himself again.

“Right, sorry, sorry! I’ll get back to eating…”

Paper nodded a little, about to turn away when something else Test Tube said caught his attention.

“It’s a shame Bot isn’t visiting today… they would’ve *loved* to meet you.”

“Bot? As in… another robot?”

“Yep… me and Fan made them.”

Test Tube’s eyes now glimmered with pride. Paper was *impressed,* to say the least.

He had no clue that this hotel housed actual *inventors*... honestly, that was really fascinating.

“Really? What is their purpose?”

“…Huh?”

Fan’s expression fell a little, staring at Paper for a couple seconds before he elaborated.

“Well… every robot is created with a purpose, aren’t they?”

Suddenly, they both understood where he was coming from, wincing a little and turning to face each other.

“Ah, well… they were… actually made to imitate our… dead… friend.”

“…Ah.”

From the looks on their faces, Paper could tell they weren’t all that proud of it.

“…But! We learnt pretty quickly that… they ended up being their own person. Growing out of that little shell we forced them into… and they’re finally… comfortable with who they are now.”

“And we couldn’t be prouder.”

...Oh...

…Why was that… so… *touching?*

The thought of another robot defying their programming… becoming their *own* person…

“Wow… that sounds… *amazing.”*

It was one of the more raw and genuine emotions he’d ever felt and expressed. His words held tone, and character, and anyone who heard them could tell Paper meant each and every

one.

They both nodded along at that, small smiles on both of their faces.

“We’ll introduce you two when they’re back from Cabby’s Library, okay?”

“Okay… that sounds good.”

The pair started engaging in another conversation with a paintbrush, who was sitting beside them. He couldn’t help but let himself dwell on that thought for a while… even as one by one, objects began to leave the table.

If another robot was able to break free of their initial programming, and evolve into someone entirely new… well what did that mean for *him?*

He realised he was starting to feel pretty tired… How much battery did he have left?

He did a quick internal status check.

- Battery: 14%

Oh. Getting quite low…

By the time he’d finished the check, every object was gone from the table, all probably heading off to their usual daily activities.

All… but *one.*

“Hey… do you… eat? I mean, I didn’t see you grab yourself a bite of anything, so I’m guessing you don’t, but-“

“No. I have the ability to, and food or drinks can be converted to a small amount of energy… but it is not necessary. Recharging is much more effective.”

OJ nodded along at that, getting up from the table and walking over to the fridge.

“Well… you want a taste of something in here?”

Paper got up from the table, walking over to the same fridge OJ opened. The fridge he so carefully organised just a few hours ago.

Well… he *was* rather curious to know what these things might taste like, but…

“No, that’s okay… I wouldn’t want to waste the food of the other-“

“I insist. Try something. You can’t go your *whole* life without trying food…”

Paper thought back to his time with Cobs, just for a moment. He’d never even considered food or drinks being… an *option* for him. Not since his inception.

Then something in the back of the fridge caught his eye.

He extended a hand into one of the cupboards nearby, grabbing an empty glass and letting the extension slink back into his body.

“Well… there is *one* thing I do want to try.”

“Be my guest.”

He reached for the massive jug near the back of the freezer, and saw a flicker of fear flash across OJ’s face.

“Oh, that? That’s my supply for when I run out of orange juice and I-“

He poured himself a glass and downed it before OJ could finish his sentence, only watching Paper in absolute shock and disgusted horror.

The robot’s expression almost instantly lit up. He felt his insides warm with a tangy sweetness, experiencing the sense of taste for the first time in his entire life.

It was… so *unreal.* Like he’d unlocked a part of himself he didn’t even know he had, one that had been empty and starved for so long now…

“Wha- you-“

“That’s *really* good…!-“

He ended up setting the cup to the side, raising the jug to the corner of his mouth and tilting it upwards.

“NO WAIT PAPER *DON’T-“*

He was too late. All of it was gone in seconds. OJ was completely flabbergasted, staring at Paper’s innocent smile as his eye twitched.

“…I… oh my god…”

At that moment… Paper couldn’t help it.

He burst into maniacal laughter, clutching his chest as he tried desperately to regain control of himself… but each of his attempts were futile. OJ’s expressions were simply *priceless*...

OJ stared at him for a while, his expression slowly starting to relax. In that moment, his irritation completely faded… replaced by that same feeling of *astonishment* he felt when they first met. He was just so *mesmerised* by how… innocent and lively he could be, even when discovering the most mundane things…

But soon even that awe faded into amusement, and he joined in with Paper’s hysterical laughter.

“Ohh… that… that felt great.”

It was another one of those moments that Paper really felt like he was starting to *live.* Only a day here, and he already felt *miles* better than how he did under Cobs…

And then a yawn escaped his lips. The notion surprised OJ, prompting him to speak.

“Oh… oh you- you must be so tired- how much battery do you have left? I mean you stayed up… *all* night…”

“Uhh…”

Paper tried to laugh it off, glancing off at some random point in the distance… but it didn’t fool OJ.

“Nope. C’mon, you’re gonna go recharge, right now.”

Paper opened his mouth to protest, but soon found that… he really didn’t have the energy to.

So he followed OJ up the steps, opening the door to his room and stepping into the station with a slight sigh.

“I’ll see you later, Paper.”

Paper gave him a quick nod, waving OJ goodbye as he left.

He stood there in the comforting silence of ‘his room’ for a few moments, his racing thoughts slowing one by one as he let himself shut down.

Between Fan, Test Tube, Soap, Cherries, and OJ… thinking about how full and free and *happy* they all were…

He could already tell that he was going to love it here.

Chapter End Notes

also this fic is going on wattpad soon maybe lmao. dont be surprised if you see it there

Chapter 4: Home of Your Own

Chapter Summary

> Paper gets to know a fellow mechanical mind, and learns a little more about adjusting to his new life at the hotel.

Chapter Notes

> NEW CHAPTTERRR WOOOO
>
> btw if updates r slower its bcs im on holiday now :)
>
> oh also the chapter title's kinda a reference to ao3 i just realised that it wasnt intentional i just wanted to rhyme home. But now im keeping it its funny

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Paper would soon come to realise that his initial ideas about the hotel being an ideal workplace for him were spot on.

He'd only been here for a few days, but he'd already slipped into a pleasant routine. He'd power on in the morning, talk to OJ at breakfast, and then head off to do whatever task he'd been assigned that day. Sometimes it was helping Soap out with cleaning, sometimes it was sorting through emails, sometimes it was taking resident complaints…

But no matter what he was doing, he'd always be happy to perform his duties, executing order after order to the best of his abilities.

At the moment he was just doing a usual check-up. There wasn't much to do that day, so he was just making sure every room was still up to standard. Checking that every bulb was working, that locks were operational, that nobody had broken their closet and was trying to hide it from OJ, which had apparently happened before…

It wasn't anywhere near as exciting as getting to hear the latest resident gossip at the complaints desk, but he still loved the job all the same. While tasks like these may seem boring to most ordinary objects… When he'd open the hotel's freezer, and feel its pleasantly bitter chill… or when he'd get a glance at one of Fan's Spoiled Lemon posters, reminding him that each and every object here had their own talents, interests and personalities… he absolutely *adored* it.

He was almost finished with all the rooms by now. The only ones left being Test Tube's (who was meant to room with someone named 'Lightbulb', but apparently she was still competing in some reality show) and of course, OJ's.

He liked saving OJ's room for last since it was usually the most well-maintained; which he supposed made sense, seeing as he never spent any time in there…

…He still spent pretty much all day working in his office. But little by little, Paper was helping take that weight off of his shoulders. That was all he wanted, really… to *help.*

He knocked a couple times on Test Tube's door. It was another room that was usually empty, since the scientist spent most of her time with Fan and Paintbrush, or off researching on her on.

But to Paper's surprise… he heard a *voice* from inside her room. A voice he didn't recognise. It sounded high-pitched and slightly squeaky, yet the charm and passion in it was audible even though it'd been muffled by the door.

"Door's open!"

Hesitantly, he pushed the door open, scanning the room for the source of the voice. What he found was… a child?

But it wasn't any ordinary child. It had four mint-coloured beads sticking out of two large, pale green attachments in the shape of butterfly wings. They looked rather… adorable, and Paper couldn't help but wonder… What object *were* they, exactly?

They waved at him, a wide and inviting smile on their face. So he hesitantly stepped inside, slowly shutting the door behind him and walking up to them like they were some sort of alien species.

They pat the empty space on the twin bed next to them, and Paper took the hint with a nervous smile on his face.

"Hiya! Are you new here? I've never seen you before."

Paper nodded, chuckling awkwardly as he rubbed the back of his neck.

"Oh… yes, I am. I'm Paper, and I started working here last week."

Their eyes lit up when he revealed that piece of information, the grin on their face widening a little.

"Oh! You're the new assistant Test Tube was telling me about! Nice to finally meet another robot around here…"

And that's when it all clicked for him.

"So then you're…"

“Bot! Great to finally meet you!”

They extended an arm towards him, and he shook their hand, feeling just how… cold and smooth it was. It was clear that they weren’t lying about being an artificial object - and that made him feel so much less… alone. Like there was someone here who could actually *relate* to him.

He took another moment to look at them, tilting his head as he did so.

“You’re… a lot shorter than I expected you to be.”

They huffed at his words, rolling their eyes and standing up straight on the bed…

…And then their legs extended to the point they almost broke through the ceiling.

“I am NOT short!”

He raised his hands in mock surrender, giggling a little.

“Sorry, I wasn’t trying to offend you!”

They retracted their limbs back to their normal height, giving his arm a playful nudge.

“Yeah yeah, I know, I know…”

Paper then decided to show off his own flexibility, extending and retracting both arms a few times.

“I can’t extend my legs like that, but I *can* extend my arms. It comes in handy whenever I need to reach taller items quickly.”

Bot let out a playful gasp, giggling at him as they examined his arms for a moment.

“No way! I thought I was the only one who could do something like that! Does that make us… limbuddies?”

“What?”

“Like… limb-buddies? ‘Cause we can both extend our limbs?”

It took a second for the name to click, but Paper couldn’t help but laugh at it once it did.

“Oh… yes! I suppose it does, haha!”

Bot joined in his laughter for a while, with their laughs sounding so light, cheerful and innocent… until the laughter died down and they were forced back into slightly uncomfortable silence.

He was about to ask them what *their* purpose was… but thought back to his conversation he’d had with Test Tube and Fan just a few days ago… and realised something like that would probably sound rather disrespectful.

Luckily though, they ended up being the one to ask him something.

“So you’re… a Meeple product, aren’t you? Like MePhone?”

Paper had yet to actually *meet* the MePhone4 model everyone around the hotel kept talking about… but that didn’t stop him from answering the question.

“Yep…”

“What’s it feel like? I know Cobs is rather… *strict* on his newer stuff.”

Paper thought back to the time he spent at MeCloud. Back to how Cobs used to treat him… it definitely wasn’t the best, and he was extremely glad to be free of that now, but… it could’ve probably been a *lot* worse, couldn’t it?

Sure, he was faced with threats, tight deadlines, the pressure to always be *perfect,* no less than *perfect,* but…

…He could’ve ended up like that phone in the clo-

“It feels… manageable. I still think about all he told me… all he *coded* into me… and sometimes it- it just feels a bit… overwhelming? Like no matter how hard I try… he’ll always be *there,* watching me, ready to punish me if I ever-“

He suspected that the growing unease he was feeling must’ve been visible on his face, as Bot gently put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

“It’s okay - you don’t have to talk about it anymore. I’m… sorry I asked…”

He could tell just from the way their voice quietened that they meant every word…

Paper set his own hand on top of theirs, squeezing it and shaking his head a little.

“It’s… okay. You couldn’t have possibly known.”

Bot took a moment to think to themselves, most likely trying to change the subject.

“…What about your hobbies?”

That took Paper off-guard, furrowing his eyebrows in confusion at their words.

“What do you mean?”

“Uhh… the stuff you do for fun?”

Bot took a moment to think on how to explain it to him, and then hopped off the bed, rummaging through a small bag in the corner of the room.

They walked over to him, holding a book that’d been adorned with countess stickers, stamps and sequins in front of his face, turning the pages and pointing to each one with pride.

“For example… I like drawing, writing, and making stories… anything along those lines, really!”

And Paper would admit, the drawings were… really good. The notes flipped by so fast that he couldn’t read them, but… with what he could see in the art pieces, so much care and thought was put into each and every one, even in the simplest of doodles of them and their family…

“…Woah…”

Paper couldn’t help but stare at them in pure awe and admiration. Bot was so… so *creative.*

They’d gone so far beyond their programming, becoming something entirely new… something *beautiful,* something so… *animated.* So *alive.*

“These are… amazing. You really think I could find something like that…?”

“Mhm!”

They shut the book and place it on the nightstand nearby, shuffling closer to him.

“But… how? How do I even *start,* or know where to look?”

Bot placed a hand to their chin, lost in deep thought for a few moments, before coming up with an answer for him.

“Well… if you’re not sure, I’d say start small, like exploring what other objects in the hotel like to do! That’s always a good starting point. There’s *so* many wonderful people here, and they’re all so cool and unique… I’m sure you’ll find *something* they do that makes you happy.”

“But… My job makes me happy. Helping everyone at the hotel… helping *OJ*... that’s what makes me happy. It’s what I was… *made* to do.”

They seemed… *surprised* to hear that answer. Like being satisfied with your purpose wasn’t something they were… used to hearing.

He thought that maybe it’d be better to take those words back, or try to rephrase them… but they simply smiled at him, nodding along.

“And that’s okay. Tons of people at the hotel are happy with what they do! But that doesn’t mean it’s the *only* thing they can do. Trust me, doing the same thing over and over and over… it’ll get boring after a while. You can’t do it *forever,* you’ll get tired eventually. You’ve gotta find something that’s your *own* thing, not something somebody programmed into you. Something that makes you feel at home.”

Paper took a few moments to consider their words… and the longer he thought about them, the more sense they made.

He'd already started getting distracted by little things at work… he wasn't all that focused on his *task,* but rather… the world that surrounded him. How the objects interacted with their environment… how they interacted with *each other*... how *they* interacted with *him*...

Those moments are what made working here so special, weren't they? Those moments are what made him feel like… like *himself.* Like he wasn't just some automation, but rather… his own person, connected to the hotel and its residents like any other.

He took in a deep, shaky breath, his smile widening ever so slightly as he responded.

"…You're… you're right. I… I'm more than just what I was made for. Thank you."

"Hey, it's nothing. You're free to hang out with me and Goo whenever, y'know! He'd love to have another limbuddy around."

They gave him a quick wink, clicking their tongue at him, earning a chuckle from their fellow robot.

"Noted… but I'm a little busy right now, so I think I'll pass. Maybe… another time?"

"Sure thing!"

He then got up from the bed, opening the door and giving them one last wave goodbye before leaving.

That… was certainly quite the talk. Not one he was expecting to have, by any means… but it was a welcome one nonetheless.

And while he'd love to get looking for a 'hobby' right away… it would *really* bother him to suddenly abandon his work without finishing it off.

OJ was *definitely* in his office, so it would be quick, anyway…

He pushed open the door to OJ's room, wincing at how loud the door hinge always creaked. It was always going to be one of those little thing that mildly irritated him, but not enough to the point where he felt the need to fix it.

He took a few steps inside, only to find that this time… he'd left one of his drawers open.

He really should've just… ignored it. But it felt like it was almost *taunting* him, practically *begging* to be explored… and if OJ had been careless enough to leave it open, surely nothing important or classified would be hiding there.

…*One* peek. Just one…

He rummaged through the first drawer, seeing what he'd find. It was… surprisingly disorganised. A spoon here, an empty container there, some… old puzzle games? Figurines? Old cables and all sorts of ties… all collecting so much grime and worn-down they'd become barely recognisable. How often did OJ actually look through these?

But there was one item in the cabinet that caught his attention. It was in the bottom drawer, tucked away at the very back… but that orange-and-white wool absolutely smothered in dust simply oozed a sentimental sense of mystery he couldn't ever hope to describe.

Eventually one of his hands managed to pull it out of the drawer, almost choking on the dust it flung into the air around him. But once it'd been completely dusted off… Paper realised what it was that he was holding.

A scarf.

Just… a soft, snug, fluffy scarf, with white snowflakes woven into a bright orange background. It was a similar orange to the shade of orange he'd see during sunrise, and Paper couldn't help but let his mind wander.

He let it wander to a chilly winter morning, where the sun was just beginning to poke out from the horizon, its golden rays melting the last of the thick, white blanket that'd gathered on the floor during the night prior…

And of course… someone else just *had* to burst through the door at that moment, making him freeze up.

"No Nickel, you didn't leave your Rainbow Dash plushie in here, you never even-"

Paper spun around in an instant, coming face to face with Nickel and Balloon. They were standing in the doorway, both staring at Paper in mild confusion and shock. He quickly tried to make up an excuse, panic and fear clear in his eyes.

"I-It's not what it looks like! I just-"

"Awww… did you get OJ a gift?"

Balloon was looking at him with the most wide-eyed, awe-filled expression he'd ever seen, clasping his hand together while Nickel only rolled his eyes.

Paper shook his head a little, breathing a quiet sigh of relief. At least they didn't think he was *stealing* it.

"Oh… uh, no. I found it while I was… cleaning. I was just… returning it."

Balloon seemed a little puzzled at that answer.

"Wait, really? I've never seen OJ wear that scarf before."

Nickel nodded along at that, mimicking the movement of a shrug with his legs.

"Me neither. Maybe he bought it while we were on season two."

"Either way… he doesn't really go out much anymore, *especially* not at winter. Still cool though."

Paper let out a quiet, intrigued hum, looking at the scarf in his hand again.

“Well… we won’t get in your way Paper. come on Nickel…”

“But we didn’t even look! Are you sure it isn’t-“

“I’m sure.”

And Balloon led Nickel out of the room, leaving Paper alone again.

He took another look at the scarf, holding it close to his chest. It was… warm. Soothing. And… smelt very faintly of OJ’s classic citrus scent that seemed to follow him everywhere he went.

…It made him feel… at peace with himself. It brought him a sense of comfort.

…Surely… surely OJ wouldn’t miss it? He already liked the cold, anyhow, being a glass of orange juice… and if he ever went looking for it, Paper would tell him everything. OJ would understand… wouldn’t he?

He walked back over to the cabinet, shutting each drawer as he wrapped the scarf around his neck, quickly walking out of the room and heading back to his own.

He’d never bothered to clean it. While he had no problem keeping the other hotel rooms spotless… he liked having his own messy sort of… safe space. All those old stains on the wall… they made the room imperfect, impure, and untidy…

But he’d grown… sort of *attached* to them. Like he’d grown attached to the hotel… and its residents… and even…

…He ran a hand over the scarf’s warm, tender texture again.

Start small. That’s what Bot told him, wasn’t it?

All the little things that other objects always overlooked… things they didn’t need or care for anymore… things that so perfectly embodied who they were as objects, or captured fleeting moments that nobody else would remember…

Maybe he could start there. Because standing here, in what was now *his* room… gently caressing OJ’s scarf as if it were the most precious thing in the world…

This is what made him feel at home.

Chapter End Notes

woahhh paper that's a LITTLE gay. just sayinggngngngngngggggggg

Chapter 5: Comforting Dread

Chapter Summary

> Paper begins to notice a shift in his and OJ's relationship, and tries not to assume the worst of it.
>
> TW: Panic attack/Panic attack symptoms! Read with caution and stay safe :)

Chapter Notes

> lalalalala im frolicking around spreading cheer and joy because this AU is completely wholesome and nothing bad ever happens in it ever

"Good morning, OJ!"

OJ let out a quiet, pleased hum when he heard the whir and buzz of Paper's footsteps heading down the stairs. He'd just gotten started on brewing his morning coffee, about to sit down and enjoy it with his freshly buttered waffles he'd just pulled out of the toaster. Something simple, but it kept him going throughout the day, so he wasn't complaining.

Paper soon joined him by the counter, a warm, bright smile in his eyes.

"I see you've already prepared breakfast."

"Yeah… I woke up a little earlier than usual today, and just thought I might as well make breakfast while I'm at it."

Paper processed that information quickly, grabbing a glass and flinging the fridge open.

And, of course… he poured himself a glass of orange juice.

OJ didn't understand why he enjoyed it so much, or why he *insisted* on having some every morning, but… he'd gotten used to it rather quickly. It was just one of life's many mysteries he couldn't explain, and buying it more often than he used to wasn't too difficult to manage.

Paper moved to sit at the table, fidgeting with his little glass whilst humming a faintly familiar tune, which caught OJ's attention.

"Wait… where'd you hear that?"

The robot shrugged, pausing to look up at OJ again.

“Oh, Mic was playing it in her room earlier. I thought it was… *catchy*, so I saved it to my database.”

“Huh.”

He was calling her Mic now? He wasn’t aware that the two were close. Paper must really be getting to know everyone…

Soon enough his coffee finished brewing, and he placed a mug of it on the table next to Paper’s glass.

He looked back at the waffles he’d prepared on his plate. There were… a lot. One or two more than he’d normally eat. He’d been pretty hungry earlier, but now…

He set another plate on the table, using a fork to fling one of them to it, pushing it in front of Paper.

The robot blinked at the waffle in front of him, rolling his eyes as he shook his head.

“OJ, you know I don’t need to eat…”

“Come on, I insist!“

OJ slid into the seat beside him, already digging into his meal, whilst Paper kept on sipping his juice.

“Mm… no, I don’t think I will…”

“Hey, come on! Just give it a go! You’ll gladly drink a cup of orange juice each day but you won’t even *try* a *single* waffle?”

He gave Paper a playful nudge, and with a slightly exasperated sigh, he grabbed a fork and knife, stuffing some of the waffle into his mouth.

“See? Not bad, right?”

“I suppose… I think I’ll stick to the juice, though.”

“You’re just trying to hide that you like them.”

“Am not!”

And all of a sudden, the two were laughing again. In the early hours of the day, where nobody could disturb them.

OJ loved these peaceful morning moments with Paper. They made him feel so much less… alone. Less isolated from the rest of the residents here.

Paper was… such a *blessing.* In so many ways. And he was so much more than the lines of code that'd brought him together.

"So… what task would you like to assign to me today?"

That sentence broke OJ out of his train of thought.

Assigning Paper something to do had become routine for the two, so he really should've been prepared for this moment with something to say. But this time… as he looked at the sheet of paper sitting so innocently in front of him…

…His mind drew a blank.

"I don't… know."

Paper's smile dropped further down his face, shrinking as he locked his eyes onto OJ.

"You don't… know?"

"Mhm. There's… there's not much to do today… yeah. I'll just handle a few last-minute things, and then maybe you can just… keep me company?"

Paper's lips pressed into a thin line, but he nodded at OJ's words nonetheless. It felt… odd, being given a task that wasn't technically productive. But in a way… he supposed he was still *helping* OJ by keeping him company, wasn't he?

"Oh… uhm… alright."

OJ gave him a somewhat awkward smile, finishing his breakfast off and heading up to his office to take care of the bills due today.

Paper had been a *massive* help in keeping the hotel running and in order. And he was extremely efficient at it, too…

…So why was he having second thoughts about making him work *now?* It was what he was *built* to do…

But… making him work just felt so… *wrong.*

It's what Cobs would've wanted him to do. To ignore Paper's clear developing personality and interests, choosing to force him into those same monotonous tasks… it wasn't the kind of treatment Paper deserved.

Besides, he'd been managing the hotel just fine before Paper - even if it was slightly stressful. He didn't need to give the robot the *entire* workload. He was meant to *assist* him, not take on all of the burden on his own two shoulders. He deserved time to relax too, to be… *himself.*

He took a deep breath, opening the door to his office and finishing everything off. It didn't take him that long, seeing how much work Paper had helped him get done…

And before long, he was heading back down the hotel stairs, watching as Paper immediately sprang to his feet and headed to OJ's side, taking his request… quite literally.

"How about we watch a movie together, hm? Does that… sound like fun to you?"

"…Uh… yeah."

OJ guided Paper back to the couch in the lobby, grabbing the remote and scrolling through their options.

"Let's see… ooh, this romance's a classic. Does it seem interesting to you?"

Paper looked back up at OJ, giving him a smile as he nodded along.

"Uh, yeah! Yeah, that seems like a great one…"

"Great! Then that one it is- oh! I should make popcorn! Wait here, I'll be right back!"

And just like that, OJ was off, leaving Paper behind on the couch with his thoughts.

What was happening? There was still work to be done at the hotel. Why was the hotel manager making him take a break *now?*

Sure, OJ *probably* meant well… but he couldn't shake this lingering unease that there was a deeper meaning behind it. That something had shifted between them, somehow.

He didn't… *get* it. He should be *happy* having more time off, shouldn't he? It was more time to discover who he really *was,* and yet…

"There we go! I made a bowl of both sweet and salted, so you can get a taste of each of them."

Paper gave OJ a ghost of a smile, watching in silence as he flicked the movie on.

Eventually… Paper managed to bury his unease as the plot of the movie began to unravel. He let himself get invested in the characters, and found that he definitely preferred salted over sweet popcorn…

And he'd have to admit, it was… it was nice. Getting to try something new with OJ by his side… it was enough to let his nerves completely fade away.

He didn't even notice it when OJ stopped paying attention to the screen. He didn't feel OJ's eyes on him, watching Paper smile and cry or cheer as the two love interests finally ended up together.

Not even OJ had realised what he was doing… It simply felt… *relaxing* to watch him, like seeing the robot slowly become more and more invested was a movie in its own right.

…Until the credits began to roll, and they made eye contact.

It forced a wave of clarity to wash over him.

Because… What was he *doing?* This wasn't someone he should be gawking at. Paper was a *robot,* for crying out loud. A *machine*...

In an instant, he'd pushed all of those thoughts away, chuckling to himself as he got up from the couch.

"Alright, well! That was fun, wasn't it?"

Luckily, OJ's nervous smile seemed to be enough to convince Paper that everything was as it should be.

"Mhm! It was… I quite enjoyed it."

Paper glanced off to the side for a moment, until a thought wandered into his mind.

"If you don't mind me asking… maybe we should do that more ofte-"

"Right! Right, yeah, of course! I'm just gonna… go restock the towels. We're running out, right? Yeah! I checked earlier, so… uh… see you later!"

"Wait, what about m-"

But OJ had already rushed off to the stairs, leaving Paper sitting on the couch in confusion.

…What was going on with him today? Why did OJ seem so… startled?

Was something *wrong* with him?

His breathing stopped for a moment, and he felt an absolutely crushing sensation in his chest.

Pain.

Actual, physical *pain*...

He felt like he was short-circuiting. What was going on? Why did he feel such an unbearable shock flood his systems, rendering him almost completely paralysed?

He couldn't handle this. The sensation hit him so suddenly, and yet it felt completely *unbearable,* like his wires and chords were being pulled apart, piece by piece, electric sparks bursting through his body. He was just *barely* holding in any screams of agony. This wasn't natural. It shouldn't be *possible*...

…He didn't even feel any relief once it was over. Only an inexplicable sense of *regret.*

What'd happened? Everything was just fine this morning…

Was he… becoming *defective?*

No… surely not, right? He'd only been out of Meeple for a few weeks…

It… it was nothing to panic about.

That was exactly what he told himself as he headed up the stairs, opening the door to his room and gazing at all the lost or abandoned things he'd started collecting over the weeks.

He ran his hand over the edges of some old picture frames he'd found in Bomb's room… one of Paintbrush's pencils, or a plant that'd been hiding in the corner of Box's room… even one of Trophy's advanced and high-tech cameras…

And… little by little, they made him feel better.

He'd be okay. OJ still appreciated him and his efforts - today proved that, didn't it?

And that short wave of… *fear,* that he felt… it was nothing more than a glitch in his system. A one-off, something that'll *never* happen again.

Everything was going to be *fine.*

Chapter 6: Break the Cycle

Chapter Summary

Paper learns what he must do in order to fight the fate life has laid out for him.

Chapter Notes

lalalalalalala

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At first, Paper thought it was only a coincidence when OJ started calling on his less to do his usual hotel duties. That maybe he'd been recognising his efforts, and didn't want him to be overwhelmed with work or stress.

He tried so hard to understand that viewpoint, and to believe it was true. That OJ really did have his best interest at heart.

But it just… *kept... happening...*

It'd gotten to the point where he couldn't recall the last time he'd actually gotten to *do* something around here.

And he simply couldn't understand… Why was this happening? Everything was fine before… had he done something wrong? Upset OJ in some way?

He barely ever saw OJ anymore. He had stopped showing up to breakfast - and whenever he did see him, it was only for a brief second in the hallway, and even then Paper's presence was rarely acknowledged by him. It was like the kind, patient, understanding object he once knew had suddenly vanished into thin air, leaving behind nothing but an empty, lifeless husk.

Paper had tried to find ways to distract himself from his thoughts. He'd picked up a few new hobbies here and there; starting a garden for the hotel, which was coming together rather nicely… he'd been reading a lot of that 'Warrior Cats' series Bot had recommended him… even learning how to play the piano thanks to the fact Mic had one in her room…

But everytime he did, he couldn't shake the idea that his services at the hotel had been… temporary. That OJ didn't want his help anymore. Didn't *need* it anymore.

That he was becoming *useless. Forgotten.*

He glanced down at the words on the page he'd been reading from, but with his troubled mind they all seemed to jump around everywhere, never staying still long enough for him to process them.

Eventually, Paper gave up on trying to read further, sighing to himself and shaking his head as he shut the book. It wasn't helping.

Instead, he got up from the bed in his room and walked over to the door, flinging it open as he headed downstairs to the kitchen.

And he was met with… someone he'd never seen before.

They seemed like a cheerful object, munching on some cookies with a massive grin on their face.

They noticed Paper almost immediately, waving him over.

"Oh, hello stranger!"

Paper put on a kind smile, walking up to them as he spoke up.

"Hello! My name is Paper… I was built in order to help OJ manage the hotel about a month ago."

"Woah, so you're like, one of Tubo's gizmos?"

Paper tilted his head to the side, blinking at her in clear confusion, doing his best to keep up his smile.

"Uh… I'm not quite sure what you mean…"

"Y'know, my friend Test Tube! She's really good with all those science-y things."

Paper let out an intrigued hum, nodding along to her words as it all clicked.

"Oh! You're one of the residents who was still on the reality show, aren't you? Test Tube's roommate, Lightbulb?"

"Yeah, that's me alright! Captain of the brightest lights in the game! I sorta got eliminated, but it's okay, 'cause now I get to hang out with everyone else."

"That's fair enough. From what I've heard, you really made quite a large positive impact on a lot of the residents here."

Paper noticed the faintest hint of surprise flicker across her face. Like she'd been craving some sort of reassurance, some form of *validation.*

That was something they had in common…

“Oh, really? Well, someone’s gotta bring the fun to the game, huh? And I’m the funnest gal there is!”

She pointed to herself with both thumbs, in a motion that made Paper chuckle a little. It made her smile a little brighter.

A beat of silence passed between them, until Paper spoke up again.

“Is there… Anything I can help you with?”

Lightbulb tapped a hand to her chin in thought, grabbing another cookie and stuffing it into her mouth. She appeared to be in deep thought for a few seconds before shrugging.

“Mm, nah. I think everything’s going pretty great! But we can like, hang out if you want, y’know? I’m sure the gang wouldn’t mind getting to see ya!”

“Oh, I’d love that, but I-“

Just then, something crawled out from behind one of the many boxes still on the counter. Something that caught Paper’s attention, that quickly scuttled onto Lightbulb’s free hand.

“Oh! Isn’t that Paintbrush’s crab?”

“Oh, yeah! They were taking care of him for me. This is my little buddy, Baxter!”

She held the crab out to him, and a smile carved its way onto Paper’s lips. He gave the small salmon crab a gentle wave, and he couldn’t help but be enamoured by the way it only blinked back; it somehow spoke to him and told him all he needed to know without a single word.

”Come on, don’t be shy! He doesn’t bite! Well, I mean, he bit me a few times, but that doesn’t really count ‘cause we just got off on the wrong foot.”

He slowly held his hands out in front of Lightbulb‘s, letting Baxter climb onto his hands, cupping the creature with his stiff, cold palms.

It felt… oddly calming to be holding him like this. Sure, his legs were a little spiky, but it wasn’t really enough to make him feel all that uncomfortable, and the crab was simply too adorable for him to hold back a smile.

“Aww… he’s adorable.”

“Uh-huh! You can keep him for a bit, I think he’s busy thinking of ways to end the world right now.”

He giggled again at Lightbulb’s oddly random humour, allowing himself to just… hold Baxter. To hold such a small, precious life form, one completely organic and made entirely of nature’s will. He couldn’t help but be fascinated by it - the way it scurried, and twitched, and nipped at every part of his hands it could find.

He wondered what it must feel like. To be completely free of a creator's limitations. Sure he'd already expanded out of and broken free of Cobs' strict programming, he was sure of that, but he still sometimes felt that aching pain reminding him he was built for a purpose. That without it, he wouldn't have the right to exist *naturally.* And that, in a way… he wasn't really *meant* to be alive at all.

A flash of orange out of the corner of his eye broke him out of that train of thought.

And he wasn't sure what it was… but *something* compelled him to hastily place Baxter on the counter and chase after that flash, like it was the last ray of sunshine on a summer's day.

He glided over to the glass of orange juice, giving him a light tap on the shoulder.

OJ turned around to face him, seemingly surprised to see him again.

"Oh, uhm… hey there, Paper. Need something?"

Paper couldn't help but just… stand there, staring at him. He didn't know why, but seeing OJ again made it so easy for him to forget everything he was going to say.

"Hi, OJ... I was… I was just wondering if we could… I dunno, talk for a bit?"

The hotel manager considered his offer for only a second before shaking his head. And was Paper seeing things, or was that… *impatience* present in his eyes…?

"Sorry, can't right now, I need to check up on Baseball's room, make sure everything's fine and all… we'll talk later, okay?"

…Checking up on rooms… that used to be *his* job, didn't it?

"Oh… uhm… alright."

And just like that, he was off, darting up the stairs and turning a corner, completely out of Paper's sight.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, causing him to flinch and turn around to see Lightbulb standing behind him, her lips furled into a worried frown.

"Hey, you good? You seem sorta… down."

Paper took a second to think about his answer… but decided on holding off on telling her about everything that had been bothering him lately. Lightbulb was such a sweet, cheerful girl… she didn't really need to hear all the problems of some random robot she just met.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Don't worry about it."

"If you say so… y'know you can tell me if your light's gone a little dull, right?"

"I know… I think I'm just gonna go upstairs, though. Head back to reading…"

Her expression deflated a little, almost like she knew there was more to his story than that. But he was glad when she didn't press on any further, gradually loosening her grip on his shoulder instead.

"Okay then… cya around, Paper…"

"See you…!"

He gave her one last wave and smile before making his way upstairs.

He was about to enter his room, lock the door, and fall into that same cycle of trying to distract himself from his thoughts that he'd grown so used to.. until he noticed that Soap and Bomb's door had been left open. And that Bomb seemed to be scrolling through some sort of shopping platform on his phone, looking to buy something…

His curiosity soon got the better of him, and he tentatively stepped inside the room. Bomb noticed soon enough, greeting Paper with a smile and waving him over.

"Oh, h-h-hi Paper! Everything o-okay with y-you?"

Paper walked over to where he was standing, nodding along as he peeked over at Bomb's phone.

"Mhm… I'm okay. What're you doing?"

"J-Just looking f-for a new M-MePhone online."

Paper perked up at that, curiosity seizing him at the idea. He was also a Meeple product, after all…

"Is something wrong with your old one?"

Bomb shrugged at that, holding it out to him, trying to fiddle with a few of the side volume buttons, but they were unresponsive.

"Y-Yeah. They just s-stopped working a w-while ago."

Paper took the phone in his hands, looking it over and chuckling to himself.

"Oh, I might be able to fix it, I know my way around Meeple hardware-"

Bomb took the phone back into his own hands, shaking his head.

"N-No, it's okay. It's e-easier to just r-r-replace it anyways. This one's p-pretty old."

That… stirred something within Paper.

That was what Meeple was all about. Always going newer, bigger, *better,* expanding in ways objects could've only ever dreamed of before. The company was always evolving, and nobody was ever satisfied with the very impressive technology they already had.

When even the slightest *problem* arose… or Cobs found a way to make his products more efficient… the old ones, the *defective* ones, became *abandoned.*

He'd witnessed that first hand.

Twice.

Once at Meeple, and once now.

Between his sporadic outbursts of panic… his fascination with the world around him, and his general sense of *self* and *sentience*...

…He *was* becoming defective.

He didn't understand how he could've denied it before…

Maybe…

Maybe what Cobs tried so hard to drill into his head before was *right.*

Maybe letting *machines* have *lives*... have *sentience*... only caused *problems. Malfunctions.*

It just… messed everything up.

Sure, maybe Cobs was… quite overbearing, and cruel, and selfish…

…But nobody could deny that he was *successful.* That the guy knew what *worked,* and what didn't. That despite everything the world had thrown at him, he'd stayed at the top of his game for so many years now.

So maybe… maybe it wasn't too late for him. He was still standing here after all, wasn't he?

Sure, trying to fix his imperfections wasn't the easy way out… but he knew, now, that it was the *better* way out of his predicament. Better than just giving up and letting himself fade into obscurity, anyway.

He wasn't going to let himself be replaced. He *couldn't* afford to lose what he'd built here.

He took a deep breath, steeled himself, and walked out of Bomb's room, his expression completely neutral.

"P-Paper?"

He ignored Bomb's voice, continuing on to his room, with the only sound he let himself hear being the whirring of his machinery.

He opened the door to his room… at all the things he'd been collecting and used as decorations… all the things that made him feel like *himself*...

And took each and every one of them down, stuffing them into a blind corner of the room, knowing he'd never let himself think about any of them again.

There was one he clung to for a few seconds longer than the others; an older, framed photo of OJ. The glass was standing in front of a newly built hotel, with a proud grin on his face as he gestured to the glorious building behind him.

…OJ deserved better.

OJ deserved the *best.*

He was going to show OJ that he wasn't useless. That he still had a place here, and could still function at maximum efficiency without needing his gift of a 'life'. That his purpose… was enough for him, and he wouldn't need to be replaced.

He let himself rely on that old code he thought he'd discarded in his system long ago. Those monotonous programs that commanded every part of his life, right down to the way he *breathed.*

They told him to set the framed photo down. To walk over to his station and charge so he'd be able to operate at an optimal rate.

And he let them control him. Let them control his every move. He knew he could get used to letting go again, it was only a matter of time.

He didn't need emotions, or a will, or a soul…

All he needed… was to follow orders. Like Cobs told him a good robot should always do.

Chapter End Notes

Paper... sweetie no :(

Chapter 7: Tipping Point

Chapter Summary

OJ is forced to look back on the way he's been treating Paper, and realises what he needs to do.

Chapter Notes

lol you guys are gonna love this one

OJ breathed out a deep sigh, shuffling through the last of the folders on hotel bills and reports for the week.

Today had just been another day for him, managing the hotel and making sure all the services were still up and running. Normally, he would've been doing just fine burying himself in hotel chores, but for some reason today they weren't enough to distract him from his thoughts.

Because… he'd been seeing Paper less and less around the hotel recently. And sure, that was mainly his fault for slowly pushing him further and further away… but he was beginning to wonder if it was genuinely impacting him and his health.

Whenever he caught glimpses of Paper, he was usually tending to some minor task he'd forget, like dusting off rooms or tightening bolts on appliances… almost like he was trying to work, despite not being assigned any tasks recently.

And if their eyes happened to meet… he'd always glance away, 'working' at an even more efficient pace, with that same neutral expression on his face.

OJ couldn't help the nagging feeling in the back of his brain telling him that this was *his* fault. That he never should've fallen back into that cycle of overworking himself… of never letting anyone *help* him, of isolating himself from the rest of the hotel… he didn't know what was running through Paper's mind right now, but he was almost certain he had something to do with it.

But he had no clue what to actually *do* about it, or how to approach him. He was almost… *scared* of trying to change their status quo, even though he knew he'd need to at some point.

He took another look at the folders on his desk, shaking his head as he rose from his office chair, crossing the distance to the door and pulling it open.

Maybe… maybe doing something more practical would let him be more productive. Something he'd need to be doing consciously…

He decided to start with the kitchen, checking cupboards and the fridge to see if he'd need to go grocery shopping or something.

They weren't exactly running low on anything… but there were only one or two Dr. Fizz cans left. It wouldn't hurt to buy more to satisfy Yin-Yang's intense thirst for them, right?

Yeah, that sounded like a plan.

He turned around, about to head outside when he felt a light tap on his shoulder.

"Uh, OJ? Got a minute?"

It was… Balloon, oddly enough. Not a resident he was used to talking to, even after he'd been let into the hotel, but…

"Oh… hey Balloon. Uh, yeah, I guess so. What's up?"

He watched Balloon deflate slightly as he let out a breathy sigh, rubbing his elbow a little.

"I just… it's Paper."

Oh.

He wasn't going to like where this conversation was going, was he?

Still, he tried his best not to let his unease sour his expression, giving Balloon a casual nod.

"What about him?"

"Well… I've just been noticing that he's become more… I dunno… *distant* lately? He hasn't caught up on the new season of Desperate Houses with me and Pepper, and I barely ever see him around the hotel anymore."

…Huh. OJ didn't realise the entire situation was affecting Paper's relationship with the other residents, too…

Balloon looked back over at him, a nervous smile spreading across his face.

"I was just wondering if you knew what was going on, since you two are pretty close."

…Pretty close?

That was practically the *opposite* of their relationship right now. Sure, maybe in the first few weeks he'd spend most of his free time around Paper, guiding him and helping him adjust to life at the hotel, but…

“I… I’m not sure what’s up with him, honestly.”

Balloon let out a quiet, intrigued hum, taking a moment to ponder his response, before thinking of a follow-up question.

“Does he… still talk to you, at least?”

OJ winced at that, scratching the back of his glass awkwardly as he glanced off to the side.

“Uhm… not really…? I thought he would’ve wanted more space, more room to grow into his own object, y’know? Without the whole ‘helping and serving me’ thing.”

Balloon’s eyebrows furrowed at that, looking… a little confused?

“Oh… I… guess that makes sense. But… have you ever thought that maybe… you’re giving him *too much* space? He really seemed to like hanging out with you.”

OJ considered Balloon’s words for a moment, letting out a deep breath.

“I… I don’t know. I’m just… scared of ending up like Cobs, I guess. Of holding onto him too tight to the point he starts to hate it here.”

“Are you… *sure* that’s what you’re scared of?”

OJ’s brain froze, like Balloon had just pulled a gear out of the complex machinery in his mind. It took him a few seconds to blink himself out of it.

What?

What was *that* supposed to mean?

Of *course* that’s what he was scared of. The last thing he wanted was for Paper to feel like he was forced to spend time with OJ due to his code, or because the hotel manager was making him spend more time than necessary together… because why else would he want to spend time with him? He wasn’t anyone special, after all…

He was about to ask about it, when Balloon shook his head, putting a reassuring hand on his shoulder as his voice took on a softer tone.

“Never mind… just… just try to be honest with him. Sure, trying to change things is scary, and it doesn’t always work out… but you’re never going to be satisfied with yourself if you don’t try. Take it from me… I used to be the most hated object on the show, remember?”

OJ chuckled at that, rolling his eyes.

“And a *terrible* manipulator.”

“Hey, not the point!”

He couldn’t stop the quiet snicker that escaped him as Balloon continued with a pout.

“But what I’m saying is… I *tried* to make things better. I talked to the people I’d hurt, and even made new friends out of it, apologising for my mistakes. Hell, I thought me and Nickel would *never* get along after season two, but look where we are now!”

OJ took a moment to really consider Balloon’s words… and realised he had a point there.

He had to talk things out with Paper. To apologise, and do his best to mend their broken bond. A bond that he was… really starting to miss.

Paper’s innocent laughter, his excitement at the simplest things, how he was always so ready to help him with any problem, so patient, caring and understanding…

He’d never let himself think about just how… *empty* he felt without him. Even if he was meant to be just a robot… it was clear to him now that he was so much *more* than that. And that he never should’ve treated him that way… being ignored all the time was the last thing he deserved.

“…You’re right, Balloon… thanks for the advice.”

“Hey, anytime!”

Balloon let the hand on OJ’s shoulder fall back to his sides, waving him off as he headed out of the kitchen, now determined to find Paper and mend everything he’d carelessly tossed away.

Luckily, he wouldn’t have to spend too long looking, seeing as he spotted the metal sheet re-organising some video games in the lobby. Looked like he was doing it by colour this time…

He breathed a sigh of relief, making his way over to him and calling out to him.

“Hey, Paper! Do you have a minute? We need to talk.”

There was no reply, aside from Paper pausing in what he was doing, going completely motionless.

He crossed the rest of the distance to him, trying to catch his attention, but he still didn’t move.

“Paper, we really need to-“

Paper’s legs gave out from under him, and he sank to the floor.

OJ felt his heart jump for a split second, staring at Paper in disbelief, before immediately crouching beside him as concern and worry overtook him.

“Paper, is everything okay…?”

He heard Paper’s breathing start to pick up, as his machinery started to whirr and clink together, a cacophony of unnatural sounds filling the air.

“Paper! Paper, deep breaths… please, I’ve got you…-“

He tried wrapping an arm around him, but that only seemed to make everything worse, as he shrunk in on himself as the sounds grew louder and more frantic. An electric shock to his arm caused him to pull away.

And that’s when he heard it.

A glitchy, uncontrollable scream tore from Paper’s throat, a noise unlike any he’d ever heard from him before. The scream soon morphed into an ear-splitting wail, a sound so loud he could’ve sworn he felt his glass start to crack…

He could only imagine the pain Paper was experiencing… what was going on? Was he experiencing some sort of error? He had no clue what to do, how to help, how to *handle this,* despite how much he desperately wanted to make everything okay…

It’d even caught the attention of the other residents, most of them having the same concern and fear present in their eyes…

…Though Fan and Test Tube in particular seemed more… *intrigued?* Almost as if the sound was *familiar* to them…

But in just a few seconds… it was over, just as quickly as it’d begun.

Paper gripped his own arms, completely stunned at what’d just happened, his eyes starting to widen as he processed everything, darting around as he realised just how many people were looking at him.

“Paper…?”

OJ’s voice was gentle and cautious, reaching a hand out to him tentatively if he were approaching a frightened animal.

In that moment, they made eye contact, and OJ got a look into Paper’s erratic, shaky eyes…

…And then Paper immediately rose to his feet, running up the stairs before he could even get another word out.

Chapter 8: Cherished Moments

Chapter Summary

OJ confronts Paper on how their relationship has changed over the past few weeks... and emphasises how he wants to make things right again.

Chapter Notes

lol you guys are gonna love this one

but like.. actually this time… I promise

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Paper… Paper *wait!-"*

Somewhere behind him, Paper heard OJ call his name, probably desperate for some sort of explanation; but there was *no* way he was ready to confront him. Not now.

Instead, he ran straight into his room, locking the door behind him as he curled into a ball on the floor.

Why… why was it so uncontrollably *painful* that time? Why couldn't he just suck it up and keep working like he usually did? Why did he have to *scream?*

He thought ridding himself of his personality would put an end to those glitches, not make them *worse.*

He wasn't experiencing these glitches before… If it wasn't his personality, then *what* changed? Why were they happening in the first place?

Was there really nothing he could do to *stop* them? To return to that state where he was able to work day and night without a care in the world?

Was it because OJ was there?

Paper had *no* idea…

To make matters worse… now the *entire* hotel knew about him. About his *defection.*

He heard OJ's voice tear through the air between the muffled banging on his door, but he couldn't make out a word of what he was saying.

He didn't know what to do, what to say, how to react to the situation. It felt like after so long of trying to push everything back, the floodgates had opened and there was no easy way out anymore. He'd *failed.*

...This wasn't how things were supposed to go. Everything was *supposed* to be *fine*...

Eventually, the banging on the door slowed to a halt, and he wondered if OJ'd finally given up on trying to get him to come out and speak to him.

Paper started to wonder if it'd be better if he never opened that door. If he stayed here, forever, wallowing in his own inability to be *useful.*

What difference would it make, anyway? OJ had already made it clear he didn't need him. And sure, maybe the other residents cared for him… but at the end of the day, he was just a *robot.* A *machine,* one that shouldn't even really be able to feel *anything* in the first place.

He would've thought that OJ left the room entirely if it weren't for the fact that Paper never heard the stomping noise of any footsteps through the door.

"Why are you still here?"

The question slipped out before he could take it back. His head was too turbulent to think about it twice.

"I… I'm sorry… I just wanted to talk, but… I get it if you want to be left alone right now, it's okay."

Paper took a moment to think about OJ's words. Did he want to be left alone? He held his knees a little closer to his chest, trying to organise the mess of thoughts in his head enough to come up with some sort of rational conclusion.

…No. He didn't want to be left alone. That was the *last* thing he wanted.

"…No."

"Then I'll stay."

The robot slowly rose to his feet, taking a few steps towards the door and resting his hand on the smooth, golden handle, twisting it and letting the door fall open.

OJ's expression seemed more… concerned, worried and sympathetic than angry or annoyed. He took a deep breath, biting his lip for a moment before continuing.

"Paper, I… I'm *so* sorry."

Paper stared at OJ with a curious, slightly confused expression.

“Why are you sorry? You don’t have anything to apologise for.”

His confusion was matched by OJ, who only shook his head.

“What? Of course I do. I’ve been neglecting you for so long, choosing to bury myself in work and never paying any attention to you…”

“…But you had a right to neglect me. I was growing inefficient, and I-“

He felt his breath hitch in his throat, and suddenly OJ’s arms around him. It brought him… comfort.

It made it a lot harder to think clearly, struggling to put his confusing emotions into words.

“…I don’t… deserve your comfort… I- I’m not *right.* So *selfish,* and *useless,* and-“

“Hey. Hey… Paper… look at me.”

His voice was somehow even softer now, and Paper had little trouble obeying, looking up into OJ’s gentle, warm, sincere eyes.

“Do you remember what I told you when you first arrived at the hotel?”

Paper had almost forgotten those words… those words that were so important to him, that felt like they always sat in the back of his mind…

“…That I have a right to a life? Like… everyone else?”

OJ nodded along at that, gently caressing the corner of Paper’s page.

“That still stands, you know. And having a *life?* Really *living?* That comes with a couple stumbles and mistakes. You shouldn’t blame yourself for those. But being comforted? *Getting* help, instead of being the one giving it? That’s a part of life too. We can’t be strong all the time.”

Paper couldn’t wrap his head around that. To him, it made no sense…

“…Why not just replace me with a robot who could do it better? Faster? *Easier?”*

OJ seemed to ponder that question for a moment. Not searching for an answer, but rather a way to answer it in a way Paper would understand.

“Because it wouldn’t be *you.* It wouldn’t be the same robot I’d gotten to know, the one I’ve smiled and laughed with. I’m not going to just throw you away like you don’t matter.”

“But I *don’t* matter.”

“You matter to me.”

Paper was left absolutely speechless at those words. He replayed them in his mind, over and over, staring at OJ whilst trying to find even a hint of insincerity in his reassuring gaze.

He found nothing. Nothing but pure, genuine *care.*

“Every time you’d giggle or tease me at the simplest things… your thoughtfulness and willingness to help others… even your weird obsession with orange juice. I can’t just… get rid of all that. Trust me, I tried… and look at what happened to me. Alone, overworked… I just ended up right back where I started. I can’t *do* this without *you*, Paper.”

…Oh.

Paper… he couldn’t possibly begin to describe what he was feeling right now. It was like his machinery was being lit on fire all at once… a bright, beautiful, *glorious* fire, one that burned through every doubt he’d ever given himself.

And in just a moment, there were tears flowing out of his eyes. Tears he couldn’t stop, or control, rolling down his face like waves in a river of relief and elation. Tears he didn’t even know he could produce. OJ’s grip on him tightened, and for once he just… let himself cry. Let his emotions flood out of his system, and let himself… *feel.*

Throughout it all, OJ just… held him. Let him be weak, be vulnerable. Let him be *alive.*

Even when the tears ran dry, and Paper remained trembling and sniffling… OJ still held him close, drying his tears with his thumbs, providing him with the comfort he’d been desperately craving. The comfort he *needed.*

“I-… I *love* it here, OJ… I love working with you, and all the residents here. I love tending to the flowers and s-seeing them slowly grow overtime. I love hearing all the silly gossip other objects share with me… I love m-making sure all the rooms are as neat and tidy as they can be, showing you all the same kindness I was shown countless times… I… I love *being* here. I love *contributing* to your little ecosystem… a-and I can’t describe how much it means to me that you so easily accepted me as a part of it…”

OJ stood there blinking at him for a few moments, trying to comprehend what he’d just heard. Paper felt his grip on him go just a little slack.

And then he just… smiled at him. A dumb, dorky smile, one that’d been tethered to Paper’s memory as soon as he caught sight of it.

“Wow… I… I can’t believe you really think all that about this place…”

The smile faded from his face, as he fully grasped the weight of everything that’d happened and what he’d done.

“I… I still can’t believe I *ever* made you feel like you didn’t deserve to work here. I’m… I’m so sorry, Paper… I was… so afraid of becoming like Cobs, I didn’t stop to think about how I was making you feel...”

“It’s… it’s okay. I forgive you, OJ… and you were nothing like Cobs. Cobs never gave me the freedom to be my own object, yet *you* did. And for that, I will always be grateful.”

He seemed… genuinely touched by Paper’s words.

"…Thank you."

They remained like that, in each other's embrace, basking in their comforting appreciation for one another. They felt… whole. Felt complete.

It felt… *so* good to be with OJ like this again. Paper hadn't realised how much he'd missed the feeling…

And he realised in that moment… he could never truly get rid of his 'defections'. His personality, interests, loves and little quirks… they all made him who he *was.* And even if he got hurt here and there…

Moments like this… made everything feel *worth* it.

Though eventually they did have to pull away, and the mood subtly shifted when OJ took a glance around Paper's room.

"So… you haven't really done much with the place, huh? It's a little messy…"

He started walking around the room, and Paper felt a little steam come out of his machinery as its temperature rose. He wasn't sure if Cobs gave him the ability to blush like any other object, but he hoped more than anything that he didn't so OJ couldn't see how embarrassed he was.

"Ah, well… about that, I-"

"Oh? What's this?"

The steam was now being pushed out of his machinery at a much faster rate, and he felt his cheeks begin to heat up as OJ approached the corner where he dumped everything he'd collected over the past month a while ago.

"A-Ah! Oh, I don't know how that got there-"

OJ let out a light gasp, sifting through all the clothing items, equipment and picture frames lying in the pile.

"Woah… I didn't know you had an interest in this old junk."

"Hey, it's not junk!"

Paper felt the weight of OJ's sly smirk on him, and he couldn't do much but sigh as he scratched the back of his head.

"They're relics… of your history! I- I only wanted to preserve it, I didn't-"

OJ shook his head, picking one up out of the pile and letting his smirk morph into a goofy grin.

“Hey, it’s fine. I think it’s pretty cool that you care so much about this stuff… I could maybe tell you a little about all of it, if you want?”

Paper nodded frantically, bounding over to OJ and giving him the widest smile he could manage.

“YES!”

…And then he realised how he must be coming off, trying to calm himself down.

“Oh, uh, I mean- yeah, that’d be cool...”

OJ couldn’t help but laugh at his enthusiasm, sitting down on the floor and patting the space beside him.

Paper moved to sit beside him, watching as he reached for one of the older picture frames and started explaining.

“This one was when Soap took a photo of our team after we let Balloon in the hotel… that was the summer after Season 2 started, and Bomb suggested we have a party to celebrate… Oh, and, this one’s when I first opened Hotel OJ! It was right after I won the million from season one, which I did by outlasting everyone else in the competition; even Taco, who ended up being a *way* stronger competitor than any of us thought, because…”

…Paper couldn’t pinpoint the exact moment he stopped focusing on OJ’s words, and instead started focusing on *him.*

On how passionately he recounted the stories he held close to his heart, on how adorable all his little gestures were… thinking about how considerate he was, and how much OJ… *appreciated* him…

He really did admire OJ.

…Wait…

No, admire wasn’t the right word for it. He felt something… something *stronger.* The way OJ made him feel… it was indescribable. He was just so- so sweet, and made him feel so safe, so calm, so…

So *loved.*

Love...

Yes, that was it. He finally felt like he understood it all…

He *loved* OJ.

Even though he had many flaws, had made many mistakes… Paper was willing to accept those, to see past them at all the *good* OJ had done for him.

After all… it was *OJ* that taught him that mistakes and flaws were a natural part of objects in the first place. Maybe there'd *never* be an entity that could be *truly* perfect… but in terms of what they made him *feel,* OJ came pretty damn close.

Even if he was just a robot, and realistically would never end up with someone like OJ… he wasn't going to try and suppress these feelings like he'd done before. He'd *embrace* them, letting them guide him in the things he did for OJ and the hotel.

Because sitting here, watching him ramble on and on about how amazing he and the hotel he'd founded were…

…It made him realise there was nowhere else he'd rather be than by OJ's side.

Chapter End Notes

happy pride month everyone :)))))

Chapter 9: Blossoming Souls

Chapter Summary

OJ invites Paper for a day out, and he learns some things about himself and Paper along the way.

Ever since he and OJ had that conversation in his room, things had only been getting better and better for Paper.

He and OJ slipped back into their old comfortable routine so easily, eating breakfast together and talking about whatever interested them at the time. Sometimes, OJ would give him a specific task he'd need to work on, and other times he was free to look around the hotel until he found something to do.

He worked harder than *ever,* more proud and efficient than anything the hotel had to offer previously. Anyone who caught a glimpse of him could agree that when he started a task, he was an unstoppable marvel that would finish it in *minutes.*

And it was all thanks to his newfound feelings for the hotel manager. The hotel manager who'd shown him such kindness and patience, who worked so hard to keep things afloat and had such a lovable, charming personality. It was always so easy to remember how the rim of his glass always caught the light of a beautiful sunset…

Sometimes there'd be occasions where OJ would randomly check up on him while he was doing his duties… and that only served to prove just how much he cared. That the glass of orange juice really did recognise his efforts, and that cared enough to make sure he was okay…

Occasionally they'd just… chat while he worked, too. OJ would make an excuse to stay longer, and they'd spend all day talking about the simplest things while he swept the floors or sorted through emails.

You'd think being so enamoured by him would be a source of distraction, but it only motivated him to work harder; so that when he'd finished, he was free to lock himself in his room and squeal into a pillow over him, like he was one of those lovesick teenagers from the shows he and Pepper always watched.

When he wasn't doing that, he was usually gossiping about his love for OJ to her; and she'd listen, nodding approvingly as she talked about her own love that also felt so very out of reach. It was therapeutic for them both, really.

He was very careful with the way he expressed his feelings - he soon found that the easiest way to do so with the right amount of subtlety was baking, something he already enjoyed so much. A heart-shaped pancake here, a blueberry muffin there… It was little things like that which OJ hardly paid any mind to, simply complimenting him on his skills and downing whatever he'd made in only a few bites.

Today was one of those days where he hadn't been given anything specific to do, so he was out tending to the flowers in his garden, giving each and every one of the blossoms the care they deserved.

He was simply so fascinated by nature. No matter what, it was determined to keep thriving, with no real rules or constraints. It gladly proved to the world just how beautiful it could be, letting others bask in its glory…

To him, it was nothing short of magical.

Paper was humming a peaceful tune as he watered all kinds of flowers, pleased and content with himself, until he caught a glimpse of OJ through the window out of the corner of his eye.

And he was simply… staring at him. He looked almost… *mesmerised* by what he was doing…

…But that was probably just Paper overthinking things again. OJ was the manager of this hotel, after all… he was probably only looking to keep a close eye on him, like he always did.

But then why did he look away when he caught him in the act? Why did his cheeks flush a very faint shade of red?

It was a mystery for Paper to ponder, he supposed.

When he'd finished watering the last flower in his garden and made sure it was free of pests, he walked back inside the hotel, greeting OJ with a wave and a cheerful smile.

"Hellooo, OJ! Is everything okay with you?"

OJ nodded along to Paper's words, chuckling to himself.

"Oh, yeah! I just… I didn't know you started a garden here. It looks… really pretty."

Paper felt his systems jump a little in surprise, but he managed to stay calm, offering OJ a warm, sincere smile.

"Ah, thanks! Yeah, me and Bomb have been working pretty hard on it… I thought it'd give the hotel a little more *life,* y'know? The way nature thrives in even the smallest of organisms… it's nothing short of wonderful… from the tiny critters, to the tall trees, and even those stunning flowers… they're all thanks to the power of nature, totally free to exist or evolve as they'd like."

OJ let out an approving hum, turning his focus back to the window and the landscape outside.

He felt a sudden wave of guilt crash over him. A whole ass *garden* was growing by his hotel, and he hadn't seen it until now. Just how oblivious *was* he to his surroundings?

"I get it, and it totally works! I… I just can't believe I never noticed it until now."

Paper shrugged, seemingly unphased by his answer.

"Well, you don't leave the hotel a lot, so I think it makes sense."

"Yeah… I guess so."

They stood together in silence for a few moments, until OJ was struck with an idea.

"Hey… you've never really… left the hotel, have you?"

That question forced Paper to think about the truth for a moment.

Because that was true, wasn't it? The only time he ever went outside was to nurture his growing garden. The thought of leaving the hotel and getting to actually *see* the wonders of the world… it'd never actually crossed his mind.

"…I don't think I have, no…"

OJ's face slipped into a satisfied grin, pointing towards the forest in the distance.

"And I've never stepped foot in those woods over there."

Those words caught Paper off-guard, and his eyes widened in surprise at his words.

"Wait… really?"

"Mhm. I've never had any reason to. But since I've finished everything I needed to do today… I was thinking… maybe we could explore it… *together?"*

There were no words to describe what Paper was feeling at the moment.

It sounded like a dream come true… getting to engulf himself in nature with the *one* object he loved more than life itself? Being able to run around and see all the different animals and plants hiding all around them? There was nothing he'd want more…

"Oh, yes! That's such an incredible idea, I'd love to!"

He didn't even bother to hide his excitement this time, watching as OJ's pleased smile grew just a little wider.

"Alright, then. I'll go get my cork."

Paper watched him head up the stairs, smiling sweetly to himself, until he felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Paper? Can I talk to you for a second?”

He turned to see Fan, wearing a worried expression on his face.

“Oh… uh, sure! What’s up?”

“Well, it was about the other day, when you-“

“Alright, I’m here!”

OJ appeared from the stairs, racing down them with his cork in hand, though he stopped dead in his tracks when he spotted Fan.

“Oh. What’s going on, Fan?”

OJ turned to face him, his features twisting into a slight scowl, tapping his foot.

Fan looked between Paper and OJ, noticing OJ’s growing impatience and Paper’s innocent curiosity…

…And decided now might not be the best time. They’d need a *while* to properly digest what’s happened… and it’d probably be a better idea to do so privately.

“Actually, I’ll… leave you two to whatever you’re doing. But we’ll talk later, okay Paper?”

“Sounds good!”

And with that, he hurried back up the stairs, leaving OJ and Paper alone once more.

“So… should we go?”

“Mhm! Sounds good.”

OJ walked down the rest of the stairs, popping his cork in and pushing one of the hotel’s double doors open, heading straight for the woods as Paper followed him from behind.

The walk there was practically silent, only occasionally interrupted by the cool breeze of the wind, which always seemed to make Paper giggle as he felt it on his already cool metallic skin.

It seemed like the further they got from the hotel, the more enamoured the Paper became with the world around him. The vibrant sunlight bathing the world in its brilliant glow… the sky’s dazzling, breathtaking shade of blue, with not a cloud in sight… how soft and lush the thick grass felt behind his feet, like he was walking on a bed of cotton wool…

He couldn’t help it when he started spacing out, the calm, tranquil energy washing over him as he let himself slow down… let himself truly *enjoy* this moment…

…And that was all immediately thrown out of the window of his mind the moment he spotted a meadow of flowers by the woods’ entrance.

He bounced towards them, shrieking in excitement as he admired them all… from white roses, to the intricate hyacinths, to the gorgeous blue daisies… he couldn't help but stare at them all in total awe.

"Look, OJ! Look! Look at how *many* of them there are!"

He couldn't contain the urge within him to pick a few, just so he could cherish them and admire them up close…

OJ appeared right behind him, chuckling at his behaviour. It was like watching a child discover the joys of being alive and interacting with the world around them, seeing as they'd finally gained the consciousness to do so.

After gently holding a few of them in his hands, Paper suddenly had an idea. He gathered a few loose branches, twigs and leaves, carefully twisting them into a pattern as he slotted a few loose flowers into it…

He had absolutely no idea what he was doing, and yet when he'd finished… he was holding a flower crown in his hands. One that could only be described as *majestic,* with gorgeous, pastel flowers dotted all around it. He wasted no time in putting it on his head.

He hopped to his feet, proud of what he'd made, hopping to his feet and dancing in the forest, as if that crown really was his gateway to becoming one with nature.

"Ahh, OJ! What do you think?"

OJ was about to respond without a second thought, but had to take a moment to think about his answer when he realised the first thing that popped into his head was *'I think you look beautiful'*.

... Huh?

Sure, it wasn't exactly a *lie,* but it could be very easily misinterpreted as… something else.

Why was that the *first* thing he thought to say? The thing his mind jumped to, without hesitation? That shouldn't be something to think so absent-mindedly…

"…It looks… great on you."

If Paper noticed the hesitation behind his words, he didn't comment on it, taking the compliment with a light-hearted giggle.

"Thanks! I've always- oh, wait, maybe I can make you one too! it'd fit perfectly with your-"

"Ah… uhm… that's a good idea, but I'm fine. Wouldn't want it falling in my juice, cause' the leaves can get pretty messy."

Paper let out a quiet, understanding hum at that, tapping a hand to his chin as he came up with another idea.

“Ooh! Then maybe…”

He crouched down beside a berry bush, picking a few of the small tough, bright red ones and grabbing a few of the lighter leaves. He even attached a mint-coloured flower to it, weaving it all together with a small piece of string and a little blu-tac he’d found in Paintbrush’s room earlier.

He stood up and held it out to OJ, smiling up at him as wide as he possibly could.

“…A little good-luck charm? You can stick it to the side of your glass, so nothing will fall in!”

OJ held a hand to his chest, staring at Paper’s… *gift.*

He knew it was just some berries and leaves, but at that moment… it felt like so much *more.* Like it was something *meaningful.*

Because… because *Paper* made it for him. Made it with his own two hands.

And who was he to reject such a pretty thing?

He took the charm in his hands, pressing it onto the side of his glass with a smile.

“…Thanks. It’s really cute…”

“I’m glad you think so!”

They continued to wander around the forest some more, and Paper was still completely charmed by the overwhelming beauty around him. A few of the critters were starting to show up around them, too… and the cute little robot always ran off to play with them, giggling and smiling without a care in the world.

He looked so… *happy.*

So *free*...

Some butterflies even flew by to admire the flower crown he’d made, and Paper always reached out a tentative hand out to play with a few.

He was just laughing with them, admiring the way they flocked to his crown… when OJ felt Paper’s hand slide into his own.

His expression didn’t change at all, still fascinated by the butterflies and walking without a care in the world…

And something about his situation right now… be it how lively Paper was acting, or how relaxing this simple walk through nature was…

Something compelled OJ to let go of all the fears and doubts plaguing his mind recently. All those thoughts of Paper being just a co-manager to him, or a robot, or someone he could

never love on a *deeper* level…

Because seeing him, so carefree and joyful… it made him think back on all of his memories with Paper.

All the times his brain told him just how *adorable* he was, discovering every last little detail about the hotel… or the times he'd been so thoughtful as to check up on him, or take on more of the hotel workload on his shoulders… how compassionate and reliable he was…

…Or where everyone else saw a cold, uncaring manager… Paper saw someone he could trust and confide in. Paper was so *patient* with him, even after all the times he'd fucked up… Paper was willing to be there for him, when nobody else was…

Paper was just… *perfect.*

Did it really matter so much that he was a robot? Sure, that may be true, but it was impossible to deny that he had a *soul.* That he had a heart bigger and warmer than any other object he'd ever met.

His train of thought was broken when Paper suddenly pulled away, chuckling in what he could only assume was embarrassment. He could only imagine how red his own cheeks were right now, and he was grateful that his juice hadn't started to boil…

"Oh, uhm, sorry!-"

"No no, it's… it's okay."

After a few moments spent in suffocating silence, Paper moved to lie down on the grass. It was in the middle of an orange flower patch, staring at the sun and its golden rays. Rays that lit up the flowers around them, making them look like shimmering stars. The light bounced off their petals in just the right angles to perfectly highlight the edges of Paper's sheet in a glistening, heavenly glow.

OJ's body moved all on its own in that moment, securing his cork and lying down in the grass right beside him.

And they just… laid there for a while. Some birds flew by, chirping away in the sky… but for the most part, it was just… *them,* enjoying the peaceful forest's atmosphere together.

Paper was waving his limbs around in the grass, the motion making him look like an adorable paper angel… laughing and giggling as the grass tickled his receptors…

And it was at that moment that OJ truly realised… that Paper was *alive.*

Sure, he may not have been an organic object, like he or Pickle were… but that didn't mean he was below or above him in any way.

As long as he had that *spark* in his eyes… Paper was just another living object, discovering the word with such a kind and comforting gaze…

And as OJ stared at Paper, really taking in all his endearing features and expressions… he let himself accept the truth he'd been burying deep inside for so long.

He loved Paper.

There was no denying it anymore.

He was never solely afraid of becoming like Cobs… sure, that was a slight fear in the back of his mind… but he was more afraid of letting his guard down around Paper, wasn't he? Of letting his thoughts about the robot develop into something… *more*...

But he was no longer scared of his feelings. In fact, it felt… *good* to admit them to himself, just watching Paper giggle and admire the natural world surrounding him.

Paper eventually stood up from the grass, and OJ took Paper's hand in his own when it was offered to him.

"I think… I'm ready to head back now… if you are?"

OJ stared at Paper for another moment… but nodded along.

"Yeah, that'd be nice."

And so they were off, walking towards the hotel in the distance and talking about whatever popped up in their minds.

Neither of them remembered to let go of the other's hand this time.

Chapter 10: Hold Me Until I'm Warm Again

Chapter Summary

OJ decides what to do about his growing feelings for Paper.

Chapter Notes

chapter name by floor_banana!! >:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Something that OJ didn't predict when he finally admitted his feelings for Paper to himself, was that they would get *so* much worse *so* quickly.

Now that he'd recognised the fluttery feeling in his chest whenever Paper waved at him, he might as well have been having a panic attack every time their eyes met for longer than a second.

Anything he did that had the potential to be implied as even the *slightest* bit romantic sent his heart into cardiac arrest. Every. Single. Time.

Was it genuinely impossible for this robot to stop being the cutest object alive for *five minutes?*

He couldn't even drown himself in his work like he used to when trying to deal with his thoughts. Because he knew that then Paper would start worrying about him again, and things would get *even worse* for him.

So all he could really do was hope some miracle would fall into his lap and save him from his misery.

He was about to head up to his office to finish up the last few emails he had for the day, when he ran into the very man that'd been on his mind for days on end.

"Oh, hey OJ! Everything okay with you?"

His heart started to beat atrociously fast in his chest, and he felt his cheeks start to flush a pale shade of red as he locked eyes with Paper. Oh, those dangerously gorgeous eyes, glossed with the sparkle of a thousand stars…

He would've been completely hopeless if not for the very faint voice in the back of his head telling him to respond.

"Ah- uhm, yep! Everything's A-OJ, haha!-"

He hoped his awkward smile was enough to convince Paper that his words were true.

"Are you sure? You look a little… red."

That didn't help his situation in the slightest. If anything, it made his heart hammer against the restrictive walls of his chest even harder than before.

"Oh- ah, that's just 'cause it's… hot in here! Yeah!"

Paper's deadpan, slightly confused expression was enough to tell OJ he wasn't convinced.

And now he could feel the bubbles in his glass start to rise…

"Well- good talk! I'm gonna go lie in the walk-in fridge now, bye!-"

He knew his office was in the exact opposite direction to said fridge, but he hoped that Paper paid that fact no mind as he sprinted off towards it.

When he finally got there, he slammed the door behind him shut, walking to his office chair and rubbing his forehead, trying to get his rising temperature to drop.

He could've sworn his glass' temperature had *never* gotten that high. His juice was bubbling so much and so fast he genuinely wondered if he'd have any left by the time he cooled down.

Why was he like this? Falling for a *robot* of all things… What's worse, a robot that was meant to be his *assistant!* His *co-manager!*

He didn't know whether to blame his heart for this unhinged, chaotic mess in his brain, or Paper's actions and overall demeanour for stealing it away…

It took a few minutes for his juice to cool to a reasonable temperature, sighing to himself as he tried to concentrate on the emails that were open on his computer…

…Only to be immediately interrupted by a knock at his door.

He groaned a little at the sound, not really wanting to deal with interacting with anyone else right now… but he couldn't exactly just tell them to 'go away' either.

So, reluctantly, he straightened up in his chair, and spoke in the most monotone voice he could manage right now.

"Come in."

It was… Pickle.

Well, at least Pickle was a relatively calm person who probably wouldn't get on his nerves…

“Hey, man. I just saw you run in here after talking with Paper… you okay?”

He walked up to the desk, crossing his arms over his chest, and OJ barely managed a sigh as he fumbled around for a good excuse to use.

“I… uh… there’s been a lot about the hotel on my mind lately, that’s all!-“

“OJ. We both know you’ve never been a good liar.”

Of course, Pickle saw right through that. He wasn’t a *complete* idiot, after all.

So he gave up on pretending, sinking back into his seat as he held his head in his hands.

“It’s just… Paper, he… he’s so… so *kind,* and *sweet,* and…”

He took another deep breath, trying to reorganise the thoughts swirling in his head into a coherent sentence.

“…I… I love him. But… we… we’d never…”

Pickle’s eyebrows raised ever so slightly as he took in OJ’s defeated expression.

He tapped a hand to his chin, trying to think of the right things to say to him.

“Well… I’m not the best when it comes to love, but… Y’know you’re gonna have to tell him. You can’t keep your emotions all bottled up like this.”

OJ looked up at him, sighing to himself as he shook his head.

“But what if I screw things up? What if this messes with his programming, or he rejects me and things just become awkward forever… or he eventually leaves, and-“

“OJ.”

His voice was a lot more stern now, giving OJ his full attention.

“If you never try new things, you’re never gonna move on to the next stage of your life. Sure, there’s a chance things become a little awkward for a while… but so what? Paper’s not gonna let that ruin things between you two, you know what he’s like.”

OJ blinked his eyes at Pickle for a moment, feeling an odd sense of Deja vu.

…He’d been through this before, hadn’t he? A situation where he desperately needed to communicate with Paper, and refused to for so long out of fear of destabilising their relationship.

And he *did* talk things out with Paper back then… and things *had* gotten much better.

So, logically… What harm could come from confessing to him now?

“You’re… you’re right, Pickle. Thanks for the advice.”

Pickle gently pat OJ's shoulder, giving him a reassuring nod.

"Hey, it's nothing. I'm rooting for you man."

And with that, he turned around and headed out of OJ's office.

The hotel manager took another look at the emails he still had to answer, and sighed to himself again, typing away at his desk.

Of course he was going to confront Paper about his feelings for him… he just had to finish up here first.

-

When he'd finally finished typing away at his desk, OJ bit his lip in slight fear as he realised what was coming next.

Was he… *really* going to do this? To allow himself to be vulnerable, and finally, truly open up to Paper, after all this time?

…Yes. He *had* to do this. He couldn't lie to himself - or to Paper - any longer.

He rose from his chair, heading towards his door and pushing it open, now determined to find Paper.

He gave his door a few knocks, but there was no answer.

"Paper? you in there? It's me, OJ!"

Still nothing.

That probably meant that he wasn't in his room…

So he tried the lobby, but only found Pepper and Salt chatting away while watching something on the TV; and he was *not* in the mood to risk talking to Salt right now, running out faster than he'd ran in.

He took a glance around the kitchen, seeing Yin-Yang chugging what was probably several gallons' worth of Dr. Fizz cans.

He slowly approached him, watching as he stopped drinking like a manic addict, turning to face him.

"Oh, hey OJ!"

"What do you want, loser!"

OJ rolled his eyes at Yang's usual insults, sighing to himself.

"I was just wondering if you knew where Paper was?"

They shook their head at him, giving him a shrug.

“No. No clue where he is, sorry!-“

“Your robot boyfriend’s probably doing dumb robot boyfriend things.”

OJ shook his head as they downed another can.

“He’s not my boyfriend-“

The entire can of soda they’d just chugged was spat out right in OJ’s face.

“HE’S *NOT?!”*

He had never heard them sound so shocked. Nor had he ever heard them yell in such perfect unison before.

“Uh… no, he isn’t…”

“Well… you should! So you can both be pathetic weaklings together!”

OJ just nodded along half-heartedly, already walking away from the pair.

“Uhh… yeah, I’ll… go do that.”

He headed back up the stairs again, deciding to do another sweep of the hallway. He saw him there last, so maybe he was in another resident's room?

Though out of nowhere, while searching the rooms, he heard something… oddly comforting. Something quiet, yet serene, not like the torturous screaming of other residents he usually had to deal with.

A series of notes. Melodic, beautiful notes…

It was enough to slow down the chaos in his mind, if only for a moment, as he walked towards the source of the noise, attracted to the way the notes flowed together like a moth to a flame.

It was… Mic’s room. That made sense.

Listening a little closer, he could tell that they were… piano notes. Telling a warm, pleasant, comforting tale. It was the only instrument at play, free to speak its own mind as it graced the air with the beauty of its steady, rhythmic beat.

It sounded almost like… the notes were *longing* for someone, with the way the trills floated in the air, reaching for something they could only ever hope to attain…

When the song drew to a close, he couldn’t help but open the door, just a sliver, expecting to see Mic hard at work at the piano…

…But instead, he saw *Paper.*

Mic was beside him, clapping for him with an ecstatic grin.

“That was amazing! You really meant it when you said you were gonna sharpen your skills in your free time.”

The robot chuckled a little, and OJ didn’t miss the slight light blue blush spreading over his face.

“Ah, thanks! I wanted to play around with the melody a bit more since last time…”

“It turned out great! You’re a *natural* at this.”

In that moment, Paper’s gaze flickered over to the door, and he spotted OJ peeking inside the room.

Well… he didn’t really have much of a choice but to go in now, did he?

OJ stepped inside the room with a warm smile, trying his best to find his words after being so thoroughly enchanted by Paper’s melody.

“Wow, Paper… that was… *incredible.”*

He gave OJ a light, airy chuckle at the compliment, watching as the glass of orange juice slowly began to approach him.

“Oh, thanks… It really wasn’t *that* special, I’m just starting out…”

Microphone watched the two for a moment, before she heard a strained buzz come from the door, turning to face it.

It was Soap, frantically gesturing for her to leave the room.

And as her eyes wandered back to Paper and OJ… she could see why.

“Uh… I’m gonna go play Mario Kart with Soap now! Have fun you two!”

She wasn’t the best at excuses, but her nervous finger guns were enough to keep Paper and OJ from asking any questions, walking to the door and shutting it behind her.

The effect her departure had on the air between them was instant, and OJ fidgeted with his hands a little, trying to find something to say.

“…I really meant it, you know. Your playing was beautiful.”

Paper nodded again at that, seemingly lost in his own little world for a few seconds… until he took a deep breath, rising from the piano stool as steam started to escape his ventilation system.

“I… actually wrote that piece… because…”

OJ's eyes were completely glued to Paper, who only took more deep breaths in an attempt to keep himself grounded.

And then… he heard a little 'click' from somewhere within Paper's system. Through a muffled speaker, presumably the one somewhere inside of Paper, OJ heard a recording of the wonderful piece of music his ears had just been blessed with.

He started taking a few elegant, hesitant steps around the room, and OJ was quick to join in. At first it felt flimsy, and a little off, seeing as he'd never really danced before… but just a few seconds into the song, Paper had naturally slipped his hand into OJ's, and it felt as if in the blink of an eye everything had changed.

The rhythm in his ears suddenly sounded so familiar to him. Not because he'd already heard it, only moments ago - but because now it sounded as if it were *speaking* to him. As if the music playing from Paper reminded him of his own struggles, and the turmoil within his heart… it was almost like he could *hear* Paper's voice in the notes now, and it was so loud in his mind and oh so clear…

Neither of them dared to break the spell that'd been cast on them, stepping across each other in perfect sync. Their movements transcended everything else about them, uniting their souls as one while the music continued to swell.

It somehow perfectly captured what they were *both* feeling at that moment. The fact that it resonated with both of them so deeply spoke more than any words either of them could try to muster up ever could. It was like the music was its own language; one that neither of them were speaking, but one they both *understood.*

The tension in the air seemed to become thinner and thinner with every step they took, every twirl they initiated, every time their eyes met…

As the song drew to a close… The two realised that the dull ache in their hearts was one that was reciprocated, smiles present on both of their faces. There was no need for any more words. Not when they had their emotions and the music to guide them, pulling them closer and closer together…

And as the final note of the song faded out into the air…

The two locked lips in a gentle, tender kiss.

It was unlike anything OJ had ever felt. Even though Paper's lips were cold, and perfectly smooth… they still felt so *magical* to be pressed against, their fluid movements perfectly matched by OJ's own lips. Every one of his senses had been lit ablaze, moving to wrap his arms around Paper's waist to hold him close, which was an action he eagerly reciprocated.

Even then, they were still *dancing* together, gently swaying as the world around them faded to soothing silence. All that mattered now was the *love* they felt for each other. A love so strong it easily shattered the invisible barrier between them, their relationship blooming into something entirely new.

Eventually, they did have to pull away, but OJ's arms remained around Paper's waist. He was still completely dazed, feeling like he was floating on air just by being in Paper's presence.

"Oh my god… that… that was…"

"…Perfect?"

Paper whispered, looking up at him with adoring, lovestruck eyes, his face left in a dopey grin he didn't bother to hide.

OJ matched his expression as the shock and disbelief began to fade, leaving only his undying love for Paper behind.

"…Yeah. Perfect."

He was almost tempted to lean in for another kiss, but the two were interrupted by someone bursting into the room.

"Hey Mic, have you seen my-"

…It was Cherries.

OJ's face flushed a very bright red, his juice boiling within seconds as he and Paper desperately pulled away from each other. Paper's face had never looked a deeper shade of blue, and the amount of steam escaping his system was so great OJ wondered if he'd started overheating…

"I- I swear, it's not what it looked like!-"

Both Cherries only stared at them, blinking in astonishment at what they'd just witnessed.

Though soon, that astonishment morphed into smug grins, as left cherry spoke up.

"Does this mean I get a robot papa now?"

OJ pressed his lips into a thin line, and he was beyond thankful when Soap poked her head in from behind them, an approving smile on her face.

"Hey, uh, congrats you two."

Paper giggled a little to himself on that, clearing his throat with a nod.

"Ah… uhm… thank you…"

"It's nothing."

Right cherry looked between both of them for a moment, shrugging before speaking up again.

"Well… have either of you seen my gift?"

OJ tilted his head in confusion at that, looking between Cherries and Paper as he spoke up.

“What gift?”

“Y’know! For Suitcase!”

That left him feeling even *more* perplexed.

“Isn’t she still on the show?”

Soap then joined in the conversation, opening her phone and scrolling to a text from MePhone.

“They’re coming over tomorrow since it’ll be the day before the season finale… didn’t you know?”

OJ’s eyes widened in surprise, shaking his head.

“Oh, shit, that’s *tomorrow?”*

Cherries nodded along enthusiastically to his words.

“Mhm! Sure is!”

“And I was thinking… maybe we could have a party to celebrate?”

OJ stared at them for a few seconds, laughing at the idea as if dismissing it immediately.

“…No. There’s *no* way we have enough time.. there’s so much we’d need to set up, and-“

“OJ.”

Paper set a hand on his shoulder, giving him a soft, gentle smile.

“We can do it, if we all pitch in… the season’s been going on for so long… I think it deserves to go out with a *bang,* y’know?”

OJ’s expression shifted to something more considerate then, taking the time to think about Paper’s words. It couldn’t be helped, Paper just had that effect on him. He reached out for Paper’s free hand, interlocking their fingers as he spoke up in a weak, vulnerable voice.

“…But I wanted to spend the rest of the day with *you…”*

Paper gave his hand a slight squeeze, stepping closer to him.

“We have all the time in the world, okay? Let’s give everyone this party. Planning together could be fun! Plus… we could always ditch it midway. We don’t *need* to be there.”

OJ took another deep breath, turning back towards Soap and Cherries as he reluctantly nodded.

“Alright, alright… a party it is…”

“Yay!”

Pickle walked over from somewhere in the hallway, gently picking the boys up from behind with a giggle.

“You left your gift in *my* room, remember?”

Their faces twisted into ones of recognition, nodding along to Pickle’s words.

“Oohhhh… riiiight.”

Pickle shook his head a little, rolling his eyes with a teasing smile as he turned back to Paper and OJ.

“Sorry about that… we’ll leave you alone now. And remember to *knock* next time, okay Cherries?”

“Fineee…”

Soap walked off with a wave goodbye, and Pickle soon followed, carrying Cherries in tow.

The last thing either of them heard before the door shut behind them was a loud, thrilled yell from Cherries.

“I can’t wait for the party tomorrow!”

Chapter End Notes

the funniest thing was tricking my friends into saying 'party tomorrow' without them realising it was setting them up for ch10 dread

‘Okay! They kissed! They’re happy now, end the fanfiction!’
“There’s… still 5 more chapters left.”

Chapter 11: Blink of an Eye

Chapter Summary

> The party commemorating the end of such a historic season begins. Paper learns how quickly excitement over getting to experience something so special can turn into furious dread.

Chapter Notes

> sorry for the lil' break, had to re-adjust to being back home and stuff lol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Trying to plan a full-scale hotel party in just a few hours is not a task for the faint of heart.

Anything Paper or OJ tried to suggest was met with *endless* complaints. Anything from music choice, to what snacks would be offered, and even the *guest list* were subject to change.

Though one thing they somehow *had* managed to arrange was a Spoiled Lemon reunion, which they imagined would be enough to keep *most* of the guests entertained for a while. Paper remembered when Fan had insisted on showing him some of their music; and he'd admit, it honestly wasn't that bad.

But with everyone pitching in to help with decorations and drinks, they managed to pull through. Everyone had something to do - Cheesy and Mic were on the couch gaming together, Bomb was dancing his heart out, and even Trophy wasn't actively bothering anyone. Everything was going… relatively well, and it seemed like people were having fun.

Right now, Paper and OJ were waiting by the door, ready to welcome Suitcase and Knife whenever they walked inside. Paper was rather excited to meet them - he'd heard all about how Suitcase had outsmarted her own alliance, and how Knife had apparently conspired with the mysterious Taco and toughed it out to the finish.

Though… he wasn't sure how they'd react to him. He *was* a fairly new and foreign addition to the hotel, after all, and more than anything he desperately wanted to make a good first impression on the Season 2 finalists.

He took a deep breath, clasping his hands together as he stared at the doors in front of him.

“You… think they’ll like me?”

He muttered, his smile somewhat nervous as he glanced over at OJ.

“Of course they will. You’re such a sweet and caring object, how could they possibly *not* like you?”

OJ’s smile was gentle, and sincere, but it wasn’t enough to quell the lingering doubts in his mind.

“I… I don’t know, OJ… I’m… *new* here. And I’m so *different* from all of you…”

OJ shook his head at that answer, resting a hand on his shoulder.

“Hey. You’ll do great. You’re not the only new guy around here, remember? Knife and Suitcase haven’t met any of the Season 3 contestants either. I’m sure all it’ll take is a quick explanation, and you’ll all get along in no time when they realise you mean no harm.”

Paper gave OJ a quiet, acknowledging hum, his lips curling into a slight smile. He still wasn’t entirely sure if he believed him, but OJ’s words already made him feel a lot better.

After a few more minutes of tapping his feet to the beat of the music playing from the speakers, he heard a pair of distant footsteps approaching the hotel, who he could only assume belonged to Knife and Suitcase.

They kept getting closer… and closer… and closer, until…

“Welcome to the Hotel OJ Party!”

OJ’s words were as energetic and enthusiastic as ever, greeting their guests with a toothy grin. They looked somewhat surprised by all that they’d done with the place, taking in the extent to which he and OJ had set out to decorate.

Paper didn’t really say much, just giving the two a slightly awkward wave.

“And… you are?”

Knife’s gruff, low voice shook Paper out of his daze. He assumed that Knife was talking about him, seeing as he’d met OJ in season one. So he cleared his throat and answered the question.

“Ah… My name's Paper. I’m the new co-manager here! I was built to help out OJ with things…”

Suitcase seemed to tense up at the mention of him being a manufactured object, and even Knife gave him a somewhat suspicious stare.

“Built? As in… by Cobs?”

Suitcase seemed more… confused and scared while giving that response. OJ was quick to fill her in, putting a hand in front of the robot as if to defend him.

“Well, yes… but he’s not like the newer MePhones! He’s completely harmless, trust me. Wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

Paper hesitantly held his hand out, and Suitcase was quick to shake on it with her foot.

“Ah, okay. Sorry, I didn’t mean to judge or anything, but Cobs… he’s…”

Paper nodded along to her words, filling in the gaps for her as her voice trailed off.

“I get it. I wanted to get away from him as quickly as possible while I was in MeCloud… more than *anything…”*

She let go of his hand, and Paper knew she understood where he was coming from - that he wasn’t just another mindless drone with no free will of his own. The look in her eyes was still rather distant, far from a look of genuine trust… but for him, that was fine. They’d only just met, after all; it’d be unrealistic to expect her to trust him right away.

Knife, on the other hand, didn’t really pay him much mind, instead wandering to the snack table. A little rude, for sure, but Paper wasn’t one to judge.

Then Suitcase spotted someone, her eyes widening as she rushed right towards him.

“BALLOON!”

“Ohmygosh, SUITCASE!”

OJ chuckled a little at the sight, rolling his eyes. Paper knew they were close, so it only made sense that they’d have such a heartwarming reunion.

The two stood there for a while, observing the party and making sure everything went according to plan.

”Well, Paper I guess you were right. Everything really *did* end up working out, didn’t it?”

Paper turned to face him, tilting his head at OJ’s words with a light chuckle.

“Well… I told you we could do it. We’re the best manager and co-manager this place has ever seen.”

“And the *only* ones it has ever seen…”

Paper gave him a quick nudge with his elbow, earning a chuckle from OJ.

“What? It’s true!”

“Yeah, yeah, but you know that’s not what I meant…”

“Whatever you say, Paps…”

Paper's grin only widened at that, feeling a pleasant jolt of electricity run through his system at the nickname, his cheeks flushed a very light shade of blue.

"Paps? Really? *That's* the best nickname you could come up with?"

"Hey, you gotta give me points for trying."

Paper hummed in acknowledgement at his words.

"Okay, JJ, okay…"

He leaned over and gave OJ a very light peck on the cheek… and from the way his juice immediately started bubbling up, he could tell it'd been enough to practically break him.

"Wha- hey! You can't just!-"

"Well… I just did… haha!"

OJ knew he couldn't get mad at that adorable face, waving him off with a sigh and a shake of his head.

Paper's eyes left OJ for just a moment, and he spotted someone new out of the corner of his eye. They had a bright blue screen, trying to discreetly nab a cookie from the snack table without being noticed.

He knew who it was immediately, and couldn't help but rush over.

Throughout his entire stay at Hotel OJ, he'd been so *desperately* curious to get to know MePhone4. The charismatic, somewhat idiotic host of the show every resident here had competed in. He was obviously a fellow Meeple product - and Paper had never met any other Meeple products that had a free will of their own. Any products that had… well, an actual *soul.*

"Hello!"

The robot turned to face him, pausing for a moment to give Paper his attention.

"Woah- and who are you?"

"My name's Paper! I'm a Meeple product, just like you! I was built to assist OJ in running the hotel."

Once again, there was a flicker of fear in his eyes. Of *panic.* It was one that Paper completely understood, seeing how cruel Cobs was. But it quickly left when he realised that Paper really didn't mean any harm, just standing there with that calm, cheerful smile. He finished off his cookie, already reaching for and eating another.

"So you're… *not* evil?"

"Uh… no, I'm not."

At his words, the MePhone's shoulders relaxed, and he seemed to ease up again, shoving yet *another* cookie into his mouth. Wow, so OJ's description of him being a 'careless fat slob' really *was* bang on the money, huh?

"You know… you seem pretty familiar… but you couldn't have been around while I was at Meeple, right…?"

That seemed to intrigue Paper, and he took a step closer to the foreign phone.

"I definitely wasn't… I think I'd remember you if I was, and I can assure you that we've never met. I knew what my purpose was from the get-go; OJ, the hotel, everything. And you hadn't even *started* hosting Season 1 when you were at Meeple, let alone finished it… did you?"

MePhone4 put his free hand to his chin, rubbing it while contemplating his answer, before it came to him with a snap of his fingers.

"Oh, wait! You must've-"

His words were cut off by a loud buzzing noise.

It was quiet, at first, gently shaking the MePhone as he received a call. But it was enough to deafen every other noise present within the hotel.

Paper felt his breathing speed up tremendously, a wave of nausea flooding his systems as he stood there, completely paralysed. There was nothing he could do but stare at the screen in front of him in pure shock and horror.

Or, to be more specific, the name registered at the top of the screen, telling him who the person trying to reach MePhone was…

Steve Cobs.

MePhone4 was quick to hang up, his eyebrows furrowing in worry. He tried to brush it off with a laugh, not noticing how stiff and silent Paper had become.

"Uh… sorry, Paper… where…"

Paper wasn't registering any noise but the unshakable, ear-splitting buzzing in his head. He knew what this meant. He knew what was going to happen now. He saw the world start to crumble before his eyes, and his breaths only grew shallower the harder he tried to ground himself.

Cobs was trying to reach *him.*

Was it because of his failure? His incompetence? His refusal to comply with his programming to the letter?

He thought he'd escaped Cobs' wrath. He thought he was finally free to live out his life as an independent object. He thought things were finally *fine*...

Cobs wanted him back.

No.

No, he couldn't go back.

If there was one thing he couldn't do, it was to go back. He couldn't face Cobs, not now.

Everything started to look a little… fuzzy. Like none of his surroundings were there anymore, only a distant, pleasant memory in his descent into *torture.* His breathing got faster and faster, and the endless buzzing noise only grew in volume and intensity. Almost like Cobs was insisting on coming closer, and closer, until he was inescapable.

He couldn't take it anymore.

He raced to the staircase, not daring to look back at the party for even a second.

-

"So? Aren't you going to start clapping?"

OJ groaned to himself, rolling his eyes at Silver Spoon's arrogance. Why, out of all the objects at the hotel, had this snobby asshole decided to talk to *him?*

"No, Silver. I'm not going to waste my money on a bronze statue just so I can plop it outside and absolutely *ruin* the scenery. If you want it that badly, you can buy it yourself."

The spoon scoffed at the rejection to his idea, taking offence as he placed a hand over his chest.

"*EXCUSE* me? What right do you have to refuse *me?* Do I need to remind you of my *rrroyal* status?"

OJ honestly couldn't stand talking to this guy. How in the *world* did he make it all the way to third place? How did everyone not get tired of how stuck up and infuriating he was?

"We don't have the budget for a goddamn *statue,* Silver. Plus, you don't even *live* here! Why would you need one?"

"To remind the wonderful residents of this hotel of my importance, of course!"

The hotel manager rubbed at the side of his glass, trying to will the headache developing only by standing *near* Silver Spoon to up and leave so he could focus.

He looked around the lobby, praying that he'd find an excuse to get away from him, but didn't find much to work with. Everyone else was sort of doing their own thing.

But what he *did* notice was that… Paper was *missing.* And so was MePhone, for that matter.

It probably wasn't anything to worry about, but… he still wanted to make sure Paper was okay.

He turned around without a second thought, walking towards the stairs with a sigh.

"Wha- hey! Where do you think you're going?"

OJ ignored Silver's protests, knowing he would likely find someone else to annoy soon enough.

He noticed that the door to his room was wide open, despite the fact he could've sworn it was previously shut like all the others. He assumed that it was probably where Paper had gone.

He walked inside, spotting Paper instantly, shutting the door behind him.

"Hey Paper… is everything okay with you? I know it's probably nothing, but I thought I'd check. If something's wrong, you can tell me. I'm here for you, you know."

He received no answer, Paper's back still turned to him. So he tried again, his voice quieter this time.

"Paper…?"

-

A glitchy, gut-wrenching scream was enough to alert MePhone4 that something was wrong. Very, *very* wrong.

He got out of Tissues' room, sprinting towards the source of the noise… and when he opened the door and stepped inside, his feet were met with a wet, almost sticky substance.

When he looked down, he saw a massive, empty glass. One that was rapidly leaking the same orange liquid his feet had stepped in.

He looked up to find Paper, who'd sunk to his knees, shaking and trembling like he was on the verge of having a panic attack.

He had no clue what'd happened, but his instinctual reaction was to open up MeLife, desperately tapping OJ's icon. It pulsated bright red, before fading away completely, leaving only an empty space behind.

Paper was alerted to his presence by the tapping, taking in so much oxygen MePhone was genuinely growing concerned for his system's stability.

"I- I turned around and he- he screamed, and- and he was-"

Tears had started streaming down his face, falling into the juice spilling at his feet, landing in it with a quiet plop. The juice continued to leak under his feet, and yet he still didn't move.

And then, it happened again.

Another phone call. Under the same name as before.

Paper stopped moving entirely. No sniffles, no sobs or shivers.

His eyes were glued to MePhone's screen, watching as he quickly hung up the call before anything else could happen.

The room was engulfed in a sickening silence, neither robot moving at all as the reality of the situation sunk in for them both.

Then all of a sudden, Paper's brain started working again, and he leaped to his feet, grabbing MePhone4's screen. His mind was swarming with grief, rage, despair… but most of all, a desperate need for *vengeance.* A need for *answers.* A need so blind it had overridden everything else he'd ever known, everything else he'd been so *terrified* of…

"I need to get up there. *Right. Now."*

Paper's hands were overheating so quickly that MePhone felt as if they were burning into his sides. One look at his furious, stone-hard expression told him there was no changing his mind.

"I- there's a pair of hot-air balloons I was going to use for a challenge-"

"WHERE ARE THEY."

His grip on MePhone tightened even further, so much so that he was surprised his screen hadn't begun to crack yet.

"O-Out on the challenge grounds, behind the woods-"

Paper had never run faster in his entire life. Cobs clearly wanted his attention, didn't he? And killing OJ was certainly the way to get it.

He wasn't thinking rationally anymore. He didn't have time to think about how this was probably a trap, or that he should take a moment to calm down and think through his emotions, or consider whether charging head-first into a multi-billion dollar building filled with guards was a bad idea.

Instead, he raced down the stairs, bursting the hotel's doors open and sprinting through the forest, spotting the balloons without much trouble.

He hopped into one without a second thought, pulling the valve with enough speed to rip someone's arm off.

He had no clue how he was going to confront Cobs. He was a cunning man, one who'd likely try to trap or manipulate him at any costs, and he didn't know what he could possibly want with him.

The only thing he knew for sure was that there was no turning back now. Because there was absolutely no way he was willing to sit around at the hotel and wait for someone else to

resolve this. It was *his* fight.

OJ was the object that taught him how to live. How to be *himself.* Their relationship was one so deeply engraved into his mind, and he couldn't possibly imagine what his life would be like without him.

He probably wouldn't even have a life at all.

Without OJ, he lacked *purpose,* both literally and metaphorically.

Perhaps he was acting irrationally. Perhaps this decision would lead to him becoming trapped again, and he'd spend the rest of his life doing Cobs' bidding until he got tired of him and threw him in the closet like that other MePhone. But right now? He couldn't care less.

Because without OJ, he had nothing left to lose.

Chapter End Notes

gl everyone. No turning back now

Chapter 12: Behind Closed Doors

Chapter Summary

Paper confronts Cobs, and in doing so completely compromises his innocence.

Chapter Notes

have fun

"Please, I just wanted to!-"

Pickle slammed the door shut in Taco's face with a loud thump. All she could do was stare at the sleek, brown door in front of her, sinking further and further into her regrets with how she played the game.

Things would've been… so *different* if she was honest, wouldn't they? If she'd just shown her true colours right from the get-go, and didn't get so caught up in winning the million…

…She didn't know why she thought this was a good idea. Not when Pickle so obviously *hated* her.

But where would she go from here? Back to the woods, doomed to spend eternity forever alone? Or should she try to appeal to OJ, and finally earn her residency at the hotel?

She… wasn't sure.

But at least she wasn't alone anymore. Even if she'd never understand what MePad saw in her… she was glad to have him on her side now.

She looked around for that magenta tablet, trying to spot his invisibow in the halls. She knew he couldn't have wandered *that* far.

And her suspicions were correct, for she soon saw the tablet approach her, a slightly wary look in his eyes.

"There you are… it… it didn't go well, and-"

"Taco. There's… something you need to see."

She fell silent, nodding along, not daring to question him. MePad wasn't one to suddenly cut others off; not unless what he was discussing was urgent.

He led her to the end of the hallway, gesturing for her to pushing the door open.

And to her horror… she saw a massive, life-sized glass, one that'd been toppled over and was almost completely empty. The juice she could only assume was once inside… *him*... was now leaking all over the beige carpet floor, staining it and dampening the area by her feet.

"This- what happened?!"

"I'm not sure. I noticed it when I gave you and Pickle privacy for your… discussion."

She had no clue how to handle the sight before her… but there was one thought in her mind clearer than any other.

"MePhone… he… he can bring him back, right? Where is he?"

MePad understood what she was getting at, shutting his eyes and teleporting around the hotel.

It took him a few attempts to find the phone, curling his knees to his chest and trembling with fear in the hotel's supply closet. He looked as if he'd just seen a ghost… and MePad could only assume why.

"You… did you… find…"

MePad let out an approving hum, and MePhone was quick to open up MeLife, tapping the empty spot where OJ's icon used to be.

"He… wanted my attention. And he wasn't getting it."

MePad tilted his head at how direct he'd sounded.

"But… how could he possibly-"

"Who else could?"

MePhone took in a deep breath, rising from his spot on the floor with a somewhat more determined expression.

"We can't escape him this time… you *have* to help. If he did that to OJ, he could do it to *anyone."*

"But we… no longer work together."

A look of hurt flickered onto MePhone4's face. He knew that MePad was right, and his resignation last challenge made that very clear… but after sticking together for so long, the words still hurt to hear.

"Then… don't do it for *me."*

MePad took a moment to consider his words, but reluctantly agreed with his suggestion, disappearing with a purple flash.

And in an instant, he was standing in front of Knife and Suitcase on the couch, who were seemingly discussing something together.

“Everything will be alright.”

The finalists both seemed rather surprised at his appearance, as Knife spoke up for the two of them.

“MePad? What are you doing here?”

“Please remain calm. It is time to begin your final challenge.”

-

Paper’s balloon landed on the prismatic, MeCloud pathway with a quiet thud.

While the blazing, furious fire pushing him forward still burned within his soul… standing here, in front of the very building he swore to never set foot in again… made it a lot harder to convince himself to keep going.

Still, he repeated those same words he’d told himself the moment he made this decision - that there was no turning back now, and that this was something he *had* to do. For OJ.

He pushed the door to the hot-air balloon open, dragging his feet along the reflective, pastel path leading up to Meeple Inc. HQ.

Everything was exactly as he remembered it being. Empty, spotless, void of any signs of life whatsoever… Even just walking through the halls reminded him of the countless sleepless nights he spent trying *desperately* to please Cobs, to make sure everything was *perfect* and met his *very, very* high expectations.

If he listened closely, he could almost hear the ghost of Cobs’ voice in his head, telling him where to look or what to say or when to let him take the lead…

He shook those thoughts out of his head. There was no use dwelling on any of that now…

He stepped inside the elevator, too zoned out to pay attention to whatever propaganda the screens around him were playing. It was probably the same adverts he’d already heard a million times by now.

His feet already knew where to take him. It was like he was moving on autopilot, with the only thing running through his head being that he *had* to get to Cobs. And he had to get to him *now.*

And before long, he was standing right in front of his office. Only a set of double doors away from confronting his creator.

His *abuser*.

And with one final deep breath, he pushed the doors wide open, stepping inside without a word.

“Ah, P.4.P.3.R. Good to see you again! I always knew you’d be back here sooner or later.”

He marched up to the front desk, furrowing his eyebrows as he glared at the cob of corn, his eyes as cold as the steel he was made from.

“That’s not my name. And you *know* why I’m here.”

Cobs spun around in his chair, a sly smile on his face. It was the same smile he *always* wore; thinking as if he were in control of *everything*...

“For answers, right?”

Paper remained silent, but it was enough to tell Cobs what he wanted to hear.

“And you will get them! All in due time. Let’s start from the beginning then, shall we?”

He rested his elbows on his desk, interlocking his hands together.

“Do you *really* think assisting OJ was your *only* purpose, P4?”

Paper took a moment to consider his question, thinking back on every memory he had at the hotel.

“…What other purpose could I have?”

Cobs only chuckled at that, rolling his eyes.

“Right, right. Of course you wouldn’t have noticed… let me spell it out for you.”

The screens above him suddenly came to life, each and every one playing old recordings of moments that’d only ever been described to him by his friends. Taco’s betrayal, the lemon collecting challenge… Bow’s elimination…

“See, at first… I wasn’t a fan of MePhone’s show. Found it ‘too crude’ and ‘boring’, amongst other… *problems…”*

His expression soured slightly, like remembering the roots of Inanimate Insanity brought him actual discomfort.

“…But MePhone… he had a *vision.* And as he evolved as a machine… the show did too. In ways I could’ve never possibly imagined.”

The screens continued to flicker and flash different scenes and scenarios to him… the pizza challenge, Suitcase’s rogue vote, the gemory cave…

“And I’ll admit… I was kind of getting invested! Not in the *challenges* though, no. In the *contestants.”*

Again, more scenes of objects interacting with each other appeared on the screen.

“The challenges were… lazy. Half-thought out, at best. Usually, they only involved cleaning up messes that *MePhone* had caused. But the *characters?* I will admit, I was more than a little curious to know what they were getting up to once they got eliminated! The bonds that formed when all walls came down, and they were free to act as… *themselves.”*

Paper crossed his arms over his chest, trying to appear unfazed by Cobs’ words.

“But I knew putting cameras around the hotel would’ve been… a bit *too* obvious.”

The screens then shifted to…

…Various moments Paper had spent in the hotel. Him watching Desperate Houses with Pepper, getting into Warrior Cats with Bot, even being shown around the hotel… and he couldn’t help but flinch, taking a step back.

“That’s where you come in. A cute, innocent little robot. One who, on the surface, wanted nothing more than to *help;* but that was never your *only* goal, was it? You wanted to *fit in.”*

Paper could feel his breathing start to speed up, his emotions becoming harder to stabilise.

Cobs… Cobs had access to his *memories…? All* of them…?

“It was pretty good for gathering information on how they behaved! So good I even turned it into its own spin-off series. ‘*Spark of Hope’...* quite a fitting title, right? Seeing as you had such a unique blend of that *hope.* And people *loved* it. They loved *you.”*

Paper felt like his entire world had been turned on its head, taking yet another step back as memory after memory flashed on the screens above Cobs…

“My… entire… *life...?* It was all… nothing more than *entertainment* to you?”

Cobs’ smirk widened even further.

“Right on the money. The ‘personality’ you thought you built up was carefully crafted by me, too… curious, sweet, trustworthy… it all worked together to make you the *perfect* artificial mole in MePhone’s precious ecosystem.”

Paper couldn’t process what he was hearing. It felt as though his chest was tightening, the pressure within him rising as the clockwork in his mind whirred with panic and fear.

“Of course… we couldn’t have a story without some *drama,* could we? I might’ve overlocked your processor here and there…”

He saw the moment where he sank to his knees and let out that ear-splitting scream, on the screen just to the left of Cobs…

“But the romance with OJ? You came up with that all on your own! And it really *was* such a *sweet* story. Increased the number of viewers clicking in exponentially, every single *day.* And that moment when you two *finally* shared such a warm, tender kiss…”

And then, as if on queue, he saw OJ’s face, directly above Cobs. Like the CEO was so carefully playing with his emotions, making sure every last glimmer of passion in his being died a slow, painful death.

“Even *I* teared up a little. Truly heartwarming stuff, and Meeple was *skyrocketing* in popularity. But every story has to end somewhere, right?”

That triggered something within Paper, the raging fire ignited within him once more as he pointed an accusatory finger at Cobs.

“What did you do to him?!”

Cobs wore an expression of mocking confusion, pretending to ponder his question.

“What did-“

And then, the ‘realisation’ hit, and he only laughed at Paper’s ignorance.

“Oh! I think you’re a little confused.”

His attention shifted to the screen directly above him once again. The shuffling static on the screen had never been louder.

“You must mean…”

And then it faded out. To him, standing there, in OJ’s room.

But this wasn’t a memory he recalled. No. What he saw on that screen was a *stranger.*

His once salmon margin was now starting to turn a very bright red, faded nodes visible all over his metallic sheet. Crimson warning signs were harshly pulsating in his eyes, and his hands had morphed into sharp, unforgiving claws. He was staring right at OJ, expression completely blank. Completely *soulless.*

“…what did *YOU* do to him.”

Paper watched the stranger in his skin approach OJ, electricity sparking in its hands. He watched as it stepped closer and closer to OJ, forcing him against the wall. He watched as OJ held his hands up, trying to negotiate with it, only for the stranger to ignore his desperate pleas.

And he watched…

…As *he* killed OJ.

He took a few steps back, unable to believe what he’d just seen.

Paper felt his knees grow weak, and his breathing gradually started getting faster and faster, turning into desperate, senseless gasps. He could've sworn the room was starting to spin.

No… no…

That- that *couldn't* be right. That *couldn't* be him…

"No. No- that- I- it wasn't-"

Steve Cobs cut him off with another amused, hearty laugh. Like this was all just another part of his elaborate plan.

"Oh, but it is! It's exactly what I *built* you for! P.4.P.3.R.… 'Pal For *Permanent* Free *Rest'?* You can't get more *permanent* than death, can you?"

He gripped the sides of his arms, staring up at the red, menacing figure Cobs was so proudly claiming was *him.*

Was that all he was meant to be? Was that what he *truly* was? His entire life… just a twisted maze of lies upon lies?

"I was just… a tool."

His voice sounded distant, hopeless, barely above a whisper as the facts laid before him started to sink in.

Cobs only laid further back in his chair.

"See, now you're getting it. But don't worry! All the other objects at the hotel aren't real either."

"What…?"

He almost regretted asking the question as soon as the word left his mouth, knowing that Cobs was most likely going to reveal even more information in an attempt to completely shatter his sanity.

"Oh… I forgot how *naive* I made you. See, every contestant at the hotel? Every object you've ever met? All made by MePhone. It's why they act so stereotypical… so *stagnant.* And why it's so fascinating when they find ways to evolve past their… rather *basic* personality traits."

"Stop. Stop. P-please, just *stop…!"*

Paper's voice had never sounded so emotional. So quiet, and raw, filled with indescribable *pain* and *heartache.* It was clear he was holding back tears… and that only encouraged Cobs to keep going.

"In fact, you were going to be *one* of them!"

The only reaction the trembling robot had was the way his eyes snapped up to Cobs, and he knew he'd piqued Paper's curiosity enough to proceed.

He reached for something below his desk, grabbing a crumbled sheet of paper and sprawling it out right before Paper's eyes.

On it, 'PAPER' was written at the top in bold, with a drawing beneath it of what Paper could only assume was… him. Or what he was meant to be. *Who* he should have been, if Cobs hadn't corrupted him and turned him into… *this*...

"You would've been competing alongside them, for the false promise of a *million* dollars. But for whatever reason, you were… scrapped. However, I saw *potential* in you… and I think you came out pretty good."

Paper looked at the sheet on the desk for a while, before he slowly let go of the vice grip he had on his own arms, reaching his shaky hands out to grab it… and just… *staring* at it.

"'Loyal and innocent with an evil side'… I think I captured his vision pretty well, didn't I? Just *imagine* what we could do with a hard reboot of the show! The *quality* it could have… sure, we'd have to… *get rid of* a few loose ends… but trust me P4, it'll be *worth it."*

His hold on the sheet of paper tightened, pulling at it as he tried to let out each and every incomprehensible emotion he was feeling out. It strained the notebook paper so much tears began to form in it as he ripped it apart.

He then let it fall to his feet, his frightened, horrified eyes darting all around the office. He started taking even more steps back, carefully, trying not to trip on his own feet.

"I… I can't… I- I have to-"

"What? Leave? But where will you go? Not to try to *warn* the others, surely."

He didn't seem alarmed in the slightest, leaning his head on his hand as he continued, staring straight into Paper's eyes.

"Or did you forget… that at any time, I could make you kill them *all?* Every single object you've ever grown to care for… all *gone.* And you'll be left all alone to stare at the shells of all the people you've *hurt.* You don't want them to face an early demise… Do you, P4?"

Paper's feet were suddenly planted to the ground.

Of course, Cobs had thought of everything. Every last detail he had to break down in order to make sure Paper didn't have any fight left in him.

…But he had one last idea. To try and make things right… even if only by a little.

"O-Okay. I… I'll stay with you. I'll do whatever you want, be the 'good robot' you need me to be… just… *please…"*

He could no longer hold back the tears threatening to spill in his eyes, trembling with sobs and sniffles as he looked up at Cobs.

"…Bring OJ back. *Please."*

Cobs giggled a little at Paper's clear suffering. His clear *torment.* It was all so hilarious to him; watching MePhone's puppets strut about the stage, knowing *he* was the one pulling the strings.

"Okay. Sure. Not like it'll do *much,* anyway."

He clapped his hands in the air, and more innovative, mindless Meeple droids entered the room, carrying some sort of futuristic laptop. It was placed on Cobs' desk, and the agents were quick to leave afterwards.

Cobs turned the laptop towards Paper, clicking on a folder labelled 'MePhone4' and scrolling to its recently deleted items.

And there it was.

There *he* was.

A double click on the file, and a message popped up.

Recover 'OJ'?

And with another click of a button… It was done.

"I can assure you, he's now safe and sound back at the hotel."

Paper tried his best to take a few more deep breaths, but he barely even managed *that* anymore. They came out broken, and desperate, sounding a lot more like strangled coughs… until he felt like he was able to finally utter a somewhat coherent sentence.

"What… do you… *want*... with me…?"

"What do I want with you?"

Cobs let out a quiet, interested hum, as if contemplating whether to give him an actual answer or not.

He decided on the latter.

"Oh, you won't need to worry about that yet. Just sit back and enjoy the show."

The screens above him then changed to show Meeple Inc. security footage, and on one of them he could see that Knife and Suitcase had just landed at MeCloud, in the other hot-air balloon Paper saw when leaving earlier.

He wanted to speak out. To do something, scream, run away or cry… but he found that he had no energy to. He just felt… numb.

He didn't feel like that hopeful, cheery robot he was when he first arrived at the hotel. He didn't feel like the same object who'd laughed and smiled with his friends countless times over the dumbest things.

He didn't *feel* alive anymore. Didn't feel *real.* Maybe it was his mind finally escaping the delusion that he ever was.

All he could do now was exactly as Cobs had demanded - stare at the screen, and watch, knowing everything he ever knew was about to come crashing down all around him.

Chapter 13: I see Your Eyes as Stars in the Sky

Chapter Summary

> Knife and Suitcase finally arrive at Meeple headquarters, ready to end the second season of Inanimate Insanity.

Chapter Notes

> Heh... sorry I've been gone for a liiittle bit! Hope the chunky chapter makes up for it :) this is probably gonna be the longest one LMAO
>
> Title creds once again go to floor_banana!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MePhone4 pulled his knees a little closer to his screen, sighing quietly to himself and kicking a random pile of dust on the ground.

How much longer could they keep doing this? Pretending that everything at the party was perfectly fine, when he and MePad both *knew* Cobs was trying to reach him?

He was always so used to running away. To *hiding* from Cobs… and he'd already told MePad he knew he couldn't escape him this time.

So… why couldn't he just face his fears? Why was it so hard to just *accept the call?*

MePhone didn't know the answer to that question… and he wasn't sure he ever would.

That was… until he was shocked out of his thoughts by a different type of notification appearing on his screen.

A request to recover [1] file(s) was detected near MeCloud, Meeple Inc Headquarters.

Is this you?

For a while, MePhone4 couldn't help but stare at it.

…What?

Was Cobs trying to send him something? A different kind of message?

He knew that logically, he should've just pressed 'No' and continued ignoring it like everything else… but something compelled him to push 'Yes', instead.

And he was so unbelievably grateful that he did - because the object that faded into existence before him, his eyes wide with disbelief…

Was none other than *OJ.*

For a while, they were both dead silent, still trying to process what in the world had just happened. OJ looked around the small, stuffy room they were both in - and of course he quickly recognised it as the hotel's supply closet.

He looked down at his hands, staring at them in curious amazement. He even tried pinching himself… but nothing changed the fact that he really was standing here again, completely fine, as if nothing had happened.

MePhone4 ended up being the first to break the silence.

"…OJ? You're… you're okay?"

He didn't respond for a few seconds, his mind too distracted and confused to comprehend what was even happening.

"I… I guess… I am…?"

MePhone rose to his feet, taking a deep breath as he spoke.

"What… what happened back there…? I… I heard a scream from Tissues' room, and then I saw you… on the floor *dead,* with Paper crying onto your glass."

That seemed to shock OJ for a split second, taking a moment to process that information.

"But Paper… Paper was the one who…"

He trailed off in the middle of his sentence, actually thinking back to the moment he was killed…

…He thought back to Paper's blank stare. To the way his voice sounded, so monotone and lifeless, after announcing he was going to terminate him. The fact he seemed like he was almost in a trance, unable to control what he was even *doing*...

In the moments leading up to his death, he was *terrified.* In the short time he'd spent wandering that… strange, empty blue void, he was nothing but confused.

But now?

Now he was *sure* of the truth.

He turned back to face MePhone, who seemed like he was also starting to put the pieces of the puzzle together for himself.

"…Paper was the one who… *killed* you?"

OJ shook his head.

"No. No, that wasn't- that wasn't *Paper.* That wasn't *my* Paper. That was Cobs… controlling him, or manipulating him *somehow*... it couldn't have been him."

MePhone's expression then shifted to be more… sympathetic? Almost like he thought OJ's response was… *naïve.*

"OJ, look… Cobs builds a *lot* of things. He's… he's downright evil, and manipulative… Are you sure he didn't just build Paper to get your trust, and then made him to kill you when your back was turned?"

That accusation… it flared up something inside of him. Some sort of protective urge he didn't even know he had…

"Of course I'm sure… you talked to him, didn't you? He's been against Meeple ever since he first got here, just like you. He's *not* some- worthless Meeple spy!"

OJ's hands clenched into fists, before he realised just how upset and defensive he'd gotten.

After all… none of this was MePhone's fault. It was *Cobs'.* For hurting him so badly…

For hurting *Paper* so badly…

"I… I suppose that could make sense… he seemed *devastated* when he realised you were dead, and pretty dead set on getting revenge on Cobs. Maybe that's why you're not still… y'know…"

MePhone gestured vaguely to OJ, and he completely understood what he was trying to say.

He decided to shift the subject, realising what he needed to do.

"…Do you know where he is?"

"He told me he was heading straight for MeCloud."

OJ nodded along, turning around and heading straight for the door.

"Wait!"

MePhone's yell stopped OJ in his tracks, turning around to hear whatever else he had to say.

He heard a quiet swoosh sound behind him, like that of somebody teleporting into the room… but ignored it in favour of listening to the startled phone before him.

"You're not… *actually* going after him, right? It's *Cobs!* He'd probably just kill you the moment you got there!"

OJ shook his head, completely unphased by his words. He was quite used to death by now anyway, seeing as his glass had shattered so often before…

“You don’t understand. He may be injured. I don’t know what Cobs is doing to him up there… and I can’t just leave him!”

“Why not? You know how much you’re risking here, right? If he deletes you again, I might not be able to bring you back this time!”

OJ took a long, hard look at MePhone4. At his worried, panicked expression.

And he took a moment to slow down. To really consider that question. *Why* was he doing this? Why was he so determined to make sure that Paper was okay?

Why did he care so much if Paper was hurt? Why did he get so defensive over the idea of Paper ever intentionally trying to *kill* him? Why did his normally stone-cold heart feel so… so *warm* around Paper?

There was one answer to all these questions lingering in the forefront of his mind. It was one that was so simple, and yet explained *so* much.

“Because… because I *love* him.”

That statement made MePhone freeze up. It was clear that a bold declaration like that was the last thing he was expecting; it took him some time to digest its true and core meaning.

The room was engulfed in a somewhat tense silence, until someone else from behind the two objects cleared his throat.

“…OJ. If you’ll allow me to… I may be able to help.”

He spun around to face MePad, standing right beside him and nodding along to his words.

And in just the blink of an eye, they were both gone.

-

Paper’s eyes were still absolutely glued to the screens above Cobs, watching Knife and Suitcase’s every move.

He felt completely… *empty.* No will to fight Cobs’ demands remained within him anymore, doomed to stay by his side and follow order after order without fail as long as he’d wanted.

He watched the pair of finalists attempt to traverse the maze of halls, plagued by the constant adverts blaring on each and every screen around them.

Cobs only chuckled.

“Oh, are they *lost?* This might take a while…”

He was clearly entertained by the way they ran around the fortress of rooms, as if they were nothing more than lost children exploring school grounds for the first time.

Throughout it all, Paper's expression remained stiff and unchanging.

He was barely even processing what he was seeing on the screen above him.

Was he even thinking at *all* right now? So isolated from everything he once knew… it was as if he'd completely forgotten how to feel *anything,* really.

Anything except for what was keeping him so paralysed in the first place. That sense of *helplessness.*

But no matter what Cobs did to him, that ember of emotion always seemed to spark up within him, through one way or another…

One of the cameras had flickered to a hallway that Paper knew very well. One he'd walked up and down countless times; it was simply one of the more efficient routes across the large, intricate Meeple Inc. building…

But of course, like many of life's corridors… It had a door positioned in the side of it.

A door that Paper knew all too well…

He felt his breathing start to thin out a little, watching as the finalists approached that door, and Suitcase opened it with her foot…

Even just the *sight* of the busted, glitchy phone in the closet was enough to force Paper to take a step back. To remind himself of where he was, of everything he'd so quickly learnt.

And then the pair walked inside, and the door was shut as quickly as it'd been opened.

Of course… Cobs noticed his reaction to the footage. He noticed *everything.*

"Everything okay, P4?"

Though at first, his voice seemed warm, gentle and genuine… his smirk held a hint of that twisted, condescending CEO who Paper knew was hiding behind his every move.

When Cobs received no reply, he took it as his cue to continue.

"Hm… well, if you're worried about what they're going to find in there… or should I say… *who* they'll find?"

He didn't miss the way Paper flinched. It only made his smirk widen even more.

"…There's no need to be. All that old scrap of metal knows is *what* I wanted from him; not what I intended to use it for."

As much as Paper tried to ignore the swarming thoughts rising in his head… with the way Cobs' sentences were so meticulously structured, it was almost impossible to just brush them aside. Like he'd purposely lined up all the dominos in the perfect position, just waiting for the right moment to send them all tumbling down.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh… nothing much, really. Just the samples of organic energy he obtained for me the day of his mission. Only managed to retrieve a measly *two…"*

His expression soured for a fraction of a second, but in an instant his calm and collected smile had returned, his eyes wandering over to Paper again.

"…But I think I made them count. And no real harm can come from Suitcase and Knife knowing that info - not when their fates are practically sealed already."

To think, only a few minutes ago, Paper would've so passionately protested against Cobs' plan. Would've fought with his entire being to make sure he didn't get his way…

…But now he just… *couldn't.* Not when it was so clear to him that Cobs had already *won.* That he was only playing with all his little toys, and they never had a chance at any sort of 'victory' in the first place.

Cobs spun slightly to face him, letting out a prideful sigh.

"You do know that you made the *right* decision, don't you? Staying by my side through all this."

The sudden shift in Cobs' tone broke through the numbing sensation in his chest, forcing him to dwell on his words as he continued.

"You… you'll be *useful* to me, very very soon. But to *them?* Even if you think they accepted you before… do you really think they'd accept you *now?* After what you've done?"

Paper could already feel Cobs's words worming their way into his thoughts, his lips pressing into a thin line as he let them sink in.

He absolutely *despised* Cobs, and the way he so flawlessly framed his sentences to manipulate every aspect of his mind…

…But what was worse was that he was *right.*

OJ would've likely told everyone all about what had happened to him by now. About that… *version* of Paper that he saw. The version of him that wanted the entire hotel *dead.*

What do they think of him now?

There was no other way to slice it. They definitely saw him as a *monster.* A psychotic, apathetic, deranged *monster,* feeding off of their trust so he could pick them off one by one behind their backs.

“They don’t understand the *genius* behind your design like I do.”

Paper could try to see past it. To tell himself that he was more than just a senseless killing machine.

But what was the point in denying the truth any longer? There was no hope for him anymore. No more delirious fantasy to lose himself in, no friends left to tell him he was more than the lines of code in his hardware.

He’d lost… *everything.*

His everything.

This… this was the only way to keep him from hurting anyone else. To lock everything he knew away, so far away that he’d never be able to reach and ruin any of it.

“You have nothing to go back to, anyway. This… was inevitable. And you’re handling it all very well. I’m proud of you, P4.”

The light pat on the shoulder he received had never felt heavier.

P4.

That… that was his name now, he supposed. If that was all Cobs would ever see him as, then there was no reason to try to be anything else.

And before he knew it, the door to Cobs’ office had been abruptly kicked open.

“Ah. Knife, Suitcase. Thought you’d find your way around here sooner or later… Anyway, greetings.”

He spun around in his chair to face them, and P4 was quick to do the same.

But nothing could’ve prepared him for what he’d see on the finalists’ faces.

He expected to see something among the likes of fury… determination… maybe even a little *fear* at the sight of Cobs alone…

But that wasn’t what he saw.

No. Because what he saw… was pure *shock* ; shock that was aimed directly at *him.*

“Paper? What are *you* doing here?”

Suitcase’s voice was cautious, her eyebrows knitted together in slight worry.

Cobs glanced over at P4, already knowing exactly how to answer a question that wasn’t even addressed to him.

“Ah… you must mean P.4.P.3.R.! See, he was created to… how should I put this. *Spy* on all of you?”

Nothing hurt more than seeing the raw, unfiltered look of *betrayal* that crossed her face, once Cobs finally started revealing who he *really* was.

P4 wanted to protest against his words. To tell her that ‘Paper’ had never once lied to her, and that working with Cobs was still the last thing he wanted to do… but there was no way she would believe him. Not when he was doing nothing to fight back against him anymore. And like Cobs said… there was no point in trying to clear a name that was never even real in the first place.

“Wha- is that… *really* true?”

The saddened look in his eyes spoke volumes… but apparently, they weren’t loud *enough.*

“I- I *trusted* you!-“

“Yes yes, big mistake on your part. But he *was* quite literally *made* to be trusted… so in a way, you were just helping him do his job. Oh… and he was the one who deleted OJ, too, by the way.”

“Wait, *WHAT?!”*

Knife’s voice vibrated off of the walls of the room, shaking P4 to his very core.

“I *know!* Real shocker, isn’t it! They seemed so *close,* too! Just goes to show how looks can end up being deceiving, huh?”

By now, the betrayal had practically completely vanished from Knife and Suitcase’s faces. P4 could only see disgust left in those eyes.

He didn’t expect it to.. to *hurt* so much. To see their reactions to the news, abandoning everything he told them so quickly in favour of Cobs’ twisted truth, which had *so* much more proof to back it up…

P4 *knew* this was the truth. What he was *really* made for.

So why couldn’t he just.. *accept* that? Why did staying by Cobs’ side feel like betraying who he *really* was?

”So… what? Are you gonna make him go for us, then, too?”

“Oh, that’s not- no!”

Cobs chuckled a little at the idea, and P4 felt a sudden jolt of… relief. That at least he wouldn’t have to kill *them,* too. He hated the idea of more deaths being caused by him, even if it was the death of two objects who he barely even knew at all.

“No, don’t worry. You two are both *safe.* Did you really think I’d cancel this show without a proper ending?”

Suitcase rolled her eyes, meeting P4’s for a fraction of a second as she spoke again.

“Would *not* rank highly on the list of *your* crimes.”

“No, no, there has to be a *winner!* I can’t just drop the show *now.* But I have some notes about where it goes from there.”

He clasped his hands together, glancing at P4 for a moment before continuing.

“Don’t get me wrong, the show was a solid first pass… but if we start again from the drawing board? It could *really* be something special!”

“That’s not really up to *you* to decide.”

Cobs stared at Knife for a while, about to respond, and the finalists were likely about to learn all the cursed knowledge that P4 had been blessed with.

And he didn’t know what exactly it was, but… something made him zone out at that moment, as what little remained of his mind wandered off somewhere else.

Of course, he’d heard about how Cobs was the mastermind behind… Well, *everything.* And how MePhone4 had created the contestants… and it made sense that, if he wanted to reboot the show, he’d most likely need MePhone to do it…

…But that still didn’t answer the question of what would happen to *him.*

When all was said and done and the cycle of torment began anew, what would happen? Would be he forced to help the next generation of contestants with whatever they needed? Or did Cobs only want to *torture* him, to force him to watch everything he’d ever loved burn to the ground?

He was only snapped out of his thoughts when he heard the buzz of MePhone4 calling Cobs.

The CEO’s lips spread into a deceptive smile, accepting the call without hesitation.

“MePhone4! Long time no see, you do know how to keep a guy waiting! So… why’d you do it?”

“What…?”

“Oh… oh you really don’t-“

Another arrogant laugh escaped his throat.

“I keep forgetting how *young* you are! Thinking everything you want could just… just…”

He snapped his fingers in place of whatever words he wanted to say.

P4 barely registered what he was seeing. It all seemed like a bit of a blur to him… watching Cobs place the phone on the desk so the contestants could hear the voice of their creator crackle through the speakers, listening in as he carefully guided them to the truth hidden within the cloak of deceit they’d been enveloped in, like lambs to the slaughter…

He saw the looks on their faces when they learned the truth. How they started glitching out at increasingly concerning speeds, all they'd ever known falling to their feet as they, too, learnt how helpless they really were.

"Why… Did you make me like this?"

Was a thought he'd repeated in his head, over and over again.

Why was he like this? Why… Why was he given *sentience,* but not *freedom?* Shouldn't the two go hand in hand?

He watched as they both soon lost their will to fight, just as he once had. Watched as they gave into Cobs' demands, letting themselves be cuffed and escorted away.

But not before Knife got one last burning question out.

"What *is* it that you're doing here? Really? With those eggs you've been keeping all this time?"

And of course, he only answered with a shrug.

"You'll find out soon enough."

P4 followed Cobs very closely, like a hypnotised duckling, practically unaware of his own actions.

He watched Cobs throw Knife and Suitcase in a room, set up a timer, and escort him to a completely different room entirely. A sterile room lined with metal plates and gold-rimmed windows, the endless expanse of sunset-coloured clouds he could see bringing him very little comfort, unlike what the sight had once done for him just days earlier.

Now it was just… him and his creator. Nothing else was around to distract him from his thoughts, no screens to watch as his abuser moulded him into the perfect machine he'd always wanted him to be.

"Well… I think now's a pretty good time for the *call."*

He pulled out a dial from behind his back, a sickeningly sweet smile on his face.

P4 could only stare at it in horror.

"The… call…?"

Cobs nodded, chuckling to himself for a moment.

"Ah, right! I suppose now's as good a time as any to tell you…"

He cleared his throat, as if about to start some long ramble.

“Well… when I was developing you, P4, I knew you were gonna have to be something *special.* Not like any other mindless robot I built. No, you had to be *convincing.”*

P4 gripped his arm a little tighter.

“And I knew I wasn’t going to achieve that without some… *outside* interference…”

Cobs took a moment to let his words sink in, before continuing.

“…And when I really weighed out my options… and thought about just how *useful* you’d be, how *integral* you’d be to my plans… well, the next step forward seemed obvious.”

P4 was almost certain he knew exactly what Cobs meant… but he didn’t dare to interrupt him.

“You were just the perfect project to put that remaining source of organic energy to good use. MePhone4 was… less than successful, but you *definitely* paid off. Look at how much you’ve accomplished! I was right to put all my eggs in one basket there.”

He laughed at his own awful joke, staring at the dial in his hands.

“When I first started overclocking your processor… making you have those… ‘panic attacks’. It was just for the drama and all, y’know? To get the audience more *invested* in your story. But when I started to put just a little more pressure on you, and you let out that… *scream*... one so similar to the screams that Fan’s egg had made on the show, which alerted *them*... I knew a stronger and louder wail would definitely catch their attention. And I had to save the next one for the big finale! After all, we can’t have our special guests missing that.”

And for the first time in a while, there was genuine *terror* present in his eyes. His hand twitched towards the dial, his mind trying to tell itself that trying to snatch it out of Cobs’ hands would do more harm than good.

He didn’t want this. He wanted things to go back to how they were *before*...

Why… Why couldn’t he just go *back?* Back to when he thought he had a *home*...

“Are you ready to start the show?”

P4 opened and closed his mouth, desperately trying to force some sort of denial past his lips.

But nothing came out.

Maybe… maybe he deserved this.

He heard the click of the dial turning, and everything around him immediately faded into fuzzy background noise as he fell to his knees, his arms clawing at his sides as he *felt* it. Felt the oh-so familiar tightening in his chest, the way his focused turned more sporadic as pain enveloped his body and sensors… and he couldn’t even manage a few seconds of the torment before a sharp shriek started tearing right through his throat.

-

“Wha- what was *that?!”*

Suitcase rose to her feet after the ear-splitting scream hit her at full force all at once, so powerful the very walls of the cell they were in shook. It sounded… so choked, so painful, so *desperate*...

Knife rested a hand on her case, his eyes wide with confusion and panic.

“I… I don’t know, but it sounded like…”

“…The egg. Fan’s egg.”

Knife nodded along to her words, sighing to himself.

“We… We have to *do* something about this. We can’t just… let this ship do whatever it’s going to do to those aliens.”

Suitcase looked up at Knife with a somewhat defeated expression.

“But what else *can* we do? That… that *thing* is just gonna come after us. Deleting us one by one, until Cobs gets his way.”

But then… she heard something.

Or rather, *someone.*

“Suitcase? Is that yoouuu?”

Her eyes widened as she stared at the door, running up to it so she could cut down on the distance between them.

“Toilet? What are you *doing* here?!”

“Well… after Mistah Phone fi’ed me, Mastah Adam found me along the beach! Told me I could watch clips of the contestants with this special new camera ‘ey built and report to him, so I could learn ‘ow to be the *perfect* assistant!”

The pair genuinely couldn’t believe what they were hearing.

“So you’ve just been… *watching* us? All this time?”

“Yep! Said I’d come back to ‘em when I was ready n’ all! But he’s not treatin’ me any better than Mistah Phone did… and I wanna try and help you two!”

Knife felt his eye twitch a little, groaning to himself.

“Toilet, just… *go away!* That way, maybe you’ll *actually* be helpful.”

Toilet let out a startled hum, starting to glide away from the two.

“Oh… oh a’right then…”

Suitcase turned to face Knife, the anger in her eyes piercing him like actual smaller, much sharper knives.

“What was *that* for! Hey- Toilet, wait!”

Knife only grumbled to himself, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Suitcase- between him and Balloon, you defend the *least* useful people imaginable! I wouldn’t be surprised if-“

“Wait… hang on a second. Toilet… Toilet? Are you still there?”

Knife quietened down, noticing the determined glint in Suitcase’s eye. One that told him she had a *plan.*

For a moment, Toilet could’ve sworn he heard… footsteps approaching them from behind? But when he saw nothing upon turning around, he didn’t think much of it, choosing to focus on Suitcase’s question instead.

“Uh… uh-huh… why…?”

She took a deep breath, thinking through her own plan in her head.

“If MePhone made all of us… then what if he made this ship too?”

Knife blinked at her, completely lost by what she was saying.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Don’t you see? Cobs said it himself… if we unplug Me from the system, everything MePhone made will be *gone*... and he won’t be able to attack those aliens with the ship.”

“But… but then you’ll all be gone too! Everythin’ Mistah Phone made… it’ll just go poof!”

Knife took a moment to think about Suitcase’s offer, looking down at her as he let out a barely audible huff.

“It’s… it’s our *only* option. You said it yourself… if he’s going to delete us all, one by one… then we have to use our chance to prevent anyone *else* from getting hurt too.”

Suitcase nodded along, looking back towards the steel door, as the timer counting down to their release slowly ticked above their heads.

“Toilet… can you pull the wire out? While me and Knife are ‘fighting’?”

It took a few seconds for him to give her an answer, thinking about the ramifications of what he was asking her to do… but he knew, deep down, that she was right.

“…I can do it.”

Just then, he heard a quiet whooshing sound speed behind him, turning to face the source of the noise.

"'Ey, who's-"

But all he saw turning the corner down the hall was… a… flying bow tie?

"Toilet? Everything okay?"

No. That couldn't be right. He had to be seeing things…

"Uh… yep, everything's just swell! Don't worry!"

-

"And now, the long-anticipated, not-to-be-interrupted, Inanimate Insanity 2 FINALE! The final challenge, with two finalists who've always dreamed of this day!"

"WE DON'T WANT THIS!"

He ignored Knife's protest, turning back towards the camera with a manic grin.

"Suitcase and Knife, together at last! Someone call airport security, hah… find out who will win the MILLION DOLLARS! And live. Plus, stay tuned for a first look behind the scenes of Meeple's next line of products, all with their own tie-in shows!"

He pulled down a projection of some rough drafts he had for whatever said products would be, giving P4 a somewhat aggressive nudge.

"If you liked Paper's tear-jerking romance story, you'll *LOVE* what we've got in store next! I hear it's going to be… *eggscellent."*

P4 didn't dare to move. Didn't dare to smile, or wave, or show the people beyond the screen any hint of that happy-go-lucky robot they were so used to.

"But enough preamble! Without further ado, let the final challenge… BEGIN!"

The bars were lifted, and the two were off. Punching, screaming, kicking and throwing insults at each other… and Cobs *adored* it. He stood there without a care in the world, watching the two as if their suffering was nothing more than a fun sport for him to watch.

That was… until Cobs' expression began to shift a few minutes into the challenge. It happened when… when he realised his precious dolls had stopped doing his bidding.

His expression shifted into something that he'd never seen on the CEO's face before.

Confusion.

"See… I may not know how real any of us are… but Cobs?"

Knife and Suitcase stood proudly before him, proud smiles stretched across their faces.

As if… as if they'd actually…

… *Won.*

"This is DEFINITELY fake."

He was… genuinely baffled. Cobs' sly, sophisticated, relaxed mask had come right off, as he'd *finally* been outsmarted at the very last moment…

"…What."

Knife snickered at his obliviousness.

"See, there's not gonna *be* a winner…"

"…If *everyone's* eliminated."

It took him a few seconds to realise what that all meant.

They gestured back to 'Me', with Toilet hovering by the wire connected to it, about to pull it out. Cobs ran towards it, yelling something that P4 paid no mind to.

P4's focus was elsewhere.

It was on the flying white bow tie, floating right in front of him. He didn't understand what about it was so captivating… not until he heard a gentle click of the button in the centre, and the hidden figure revealed itself.

The man before him was so… *different*... The juice inside him was now a bright pink shade, emanating a ghostly glow.

But it was practically impossible to *not* recognise him.

"Paper!"

That voice…

Oh, that *voice*...

The way he smiled at him, his breaths heavy and his eyes widened as he gazed upon the robot before him…

It… it was OJ.

OJ… OJ didn't think he was P4. He didn't think he was some cruel monster beyond saving. The only thing his eyes held was… *relief*... relief mixed in with an incomprehensible amount of *love.*

OJ… OJ didn't *hate* him.

He couldn't understand… *Why…?*

“I- h-how… What are you *doing* here? I- I *killed* you! Don’t you get it? He was just using me to spy on all of you… a-and now you’re all gonna-“

The smile didn’t leave OJ’s face.

All he did… was take *Paper’s* hands in his own. And look into *Paper’s* eyes, muttering words he knew were meant for *Paper* and Paper alone.

“It’s not your fault.”

And then, he heard the distant click of the wire being pulled out.

And suddenly… he was falling. Falling at a tremendous speed, the howling winds sending him plummeting towards the ground. And still, OJ did not let go of his hands, not caring that his juice was spilling out into the air, just trying to somehow slow their fall. *Anything* to prolong the time they had together… the time that they both knew was *running out.*

And still, OJ didn’t stop smiling. If anything, his smile only widened even further, the tears spilling from his eyes falling into the air above. He fought against the world around them to be heard. Yelled into the raging gusts of air, ignoring the seconds ticking down that were so determined to pull them apart.

“Paper! I’ll always love y-“

And then, Paper hit the ground.

OJ was gone. Just like that.

Everything was… *gone.*

The impact almost certainly did a number on his systems… likely gave him a few scratches here and there, but right now… right now he found it difficult to *care.*

All he did was… stand up, looking directly at the sun slowly setting in the sky above him. Not a single sound escaped his throat.

Again.

It happened *again.*

And yet… OJ… still… *loved… him…*

“…Let’s go home.”

Paper didn’t tear his gaze away from the sun, even as he felt a cold hand tighten its grasp around his wrist, pulling him away.

Maybe if he stared long enough, he’d still see OJ’s lively, cheerful smile in its rays. Or hear his soothing voice in the gentle breeze blowing against his page.

Or maybe, he'd hear nothing but the lost whispers of a boy with nothing left to lose.

Chapter End Notes

*paper's egg is like the blue-ish egg that MePhone3G dropped. In the SoH timeline, it fell into the Meeple ship instead of back onto the Shimmer's planet lol

Chapter 14: Atonement

Chapter Summary

> Paper realises the full extent of Cobs' schemes to destroy and seize the aliens' energy... and realises what he must do to prevent them from coming to fruition.

Chapter Notes

> Jazzy's stream today was AMAZING, I had such a good time watching the shenanigans they got up to. I still CANNOT believe Patrick read some lines from this fic, like, WHAT?! You guys are all INSANE and i seriously cannot express my appreciation for the support this AU has gotten! And hey, if you've found this fic from that stream... then I'm so glad what everyone was saying intrigued you enough to stop by lol

It took a few minutes of aimless, detached wandering for Paper to truly process the extent of everything that had happened.

He had to come to terms with the fact that things were going to go right back to the way they were before his stay at the hotel. That he was going to be forced to comply with all of Cobs' harsh demands again, seeing as the entire world he once cherished had suddenly vanished in thin air before his eyes.

He'd never get to hear the chaotic chatter of the hotel's residents debating over what to have for dinner again. He'd never get to watch another cartoon with Cherries again. He'd never get to listen to another one of Cheesy's Friday comedy shows again. He'll never get to watch Pickle and Bomb play video games again… never get to hear one of Soap's charming cleaning songs again…

Because… all of that was gone. *They* were all *gone* - and soon their presence in his life was going to be replaced by nothing but mindless Meeple drones, completing task after task as the lifeless automations they were built to be.

He felt Cobs pull on his wrist a little tighter, snapping him out of his thoughts and back to the dried grass beneath his feet.

"Keep up the pace, would you? As soon as we find 4, I'll call for backup, alright? Should only take a few minutes from there."

Paper paused completely, prompting Cobs to turn around to face him. He saw the hazy grief in his creation's eyes, how distant and stunned he was by everything that'd just happened… and he managed a somewhat sympathetic smile, letting go of his wrist and placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey. I know that was… a *lot,* but everything's gonna be okay, trust me. Better, even. When we get back, you can help me and 4 come up with new designs for our reboot cast! They'll be more… *polite,* too. No need to clean up after their messes all the time. As long as you cooperate with me, just as you've been doing… we won't have any problems."

No sounds escaped Paper's throat, and he only nodded along to Cobs' words like an emotionless doll. Because he'd learnt the only way for Paper to survive was to suppress himself, to show Cobs the obedient version of him that he wanted to see.

Even if he was at an all-time low… seeing OJ again on that ship… it gave him *hope.* Hope that maybe, just *maybe,* everything could turn out alright again…

"Perfect! Alright, now let's keep-"

His words were cut off by the sound of an alien spaceship landing right behind them. It was… literally in the shape of a massive egg, with black, metallic plates broken up by fluorescent neon green stripes. The entire thing looked… oddly otherworldly.

"…The scream *did* work after all! Okay P4, remember what I said earlier. Follow my lead and nobody gets hurt."

…Nobody but the alien species, right?

Still, Paper followed Cobs from close behind as he approached the unknown life forms.

"How can we help you?"

The creatures floated out of their ship, and Paper could see that they… actually *did* seem to resemble little coloured eggs. Like the Easter eggs Cherries showed him from those old storybooks he loved… but more… *alive,* like they were infused with a dynamic kind of energy.

"We have come to retrieve our youth! Where is the one called Fan from the reality show?"

Cobs smiled, pretending to wince as he shook his head.

"Ah, you just missed him. But don't worry, because your egg's right here."

He gently shoved Paper forward, causing his eyes to shoot open in surprise. Even the aliens seemed confused.

"I believe you are… *confused.* This is *not* one of our young…"

Cobs shook his head, his smile becoming ever so slightly strained.

“Oh, but it is! I can show you, if you’d like.”

He reached for the dial again, and Paper had never reacted faster.

“NO! No, please, I- I swear, I have the egg. Just… don’t use… *that…”*

Cobs only chuckled.

The leader of the unknown life forms - or at least Paper assumed it was the leader, as it was the only one that bore a crown - floated right up beside him, and let out a quiet gasp.

“The strangers speak the truth! I can feel the energy traces of our young from within you.”

Cobs nodded, letting out a satisfied hum.

“See, I infused the energy of that egg into my… *latest product.* But I’d like to turn over a new leaf and return the energy to you. I have no use for it anymore.”

The leader studied Cobs’ smug expression for a moment, before gesturing for him and Paper to step onboard the ship.

“Then we will begin the extraction process right away. Thank you so much for your kindness and cooperation! We truly appreciate it.”

Paper was gently pushed onto the ship by two other life forms bearing spears, sighing to himself as he looked among the aliens. He knew Cobs was only trying to gain their trust, but… maybe if he just waited a little longer…

They took a few steps into the pristine ship… and already it was nothing like what Paper had ever seen before. Hundreds, maybe *thousands* of the differently coloured aliens were gathered around in one place, the walls and floors lined entirely in beautiful pastel colours. Or maybe they were colours outside his visible spectrum, and they just appeared pastel to him? Who knows.

A few of the aliens circled Paper, and he couldn’t help but feel a little nervous for whatever would happen next.

After a few thick, tense seconds of silence, they all raised their white, glowing nubs of energy, pointing them towards Paper. A few even began to circle him - and then a few turned to many, and he began to feel their energy radiating onto him… and before he knew it, he was *levitating.*

The entire process… really was quite mesmerising. The energy whizzing around him in intricate patterns, encouraging the foreign light inside him to slowly be pulled out… even if having it removed felt somewhat draining, he couldn’t help but be entranced by the whole ordeal.

He could’ve sworn he heard them all chanting something, but the noise of their voices was quickly drowned out by his racing thoughts. Where would he go from here? What would he try to *do?* The choice seemed obvious… but would it cause more harm than good?

Bit by bit, the energy within him flowed out, almost like a river flowing back to the sea. Until there was nothing left, and Paper was lowered back onto the ground as the aliens admired the return of their long-lost child.

The sight would've surely warmed his heart… if it weren't for the fact that he knew Cobs was still on the ship with them.

Paper spotted him quickly, and when he realised what he was slowly pulling out, his heart *sank.*

And he knew exactly what he needed to do in that moment. After all… what else could Cobs take away or threaten him with if there was nothing left?

He gathered the remainder of his strength, running right up to Cobs, pushing him all the way out of the ship and tackling him to the ground before he had the chance to strike.

"Agh! What the-"

Paper turned back to the aliens, his expression worried and panicked as he screamed as loud as he possibly could.

"GET OUT OF HERE! HE'LL KILL YOU ALL! GO, GO!"

And of course, even with a few confused murmurs and whispers, the lead aliens knew what Paper meant when they spotted the knife. Of course, with their child now safe and sound, they shut the door and flew away as fast as possible.

Cobs quickly pushed Paper right off of him, his eye twitching as he gripped the hilt of the blade even tighter.

"After… *everything*... all you had to do was keep your mouth shut… and I'd have let you *live!* You were supposed to be *PERFECT!"*

Paper quickly got up from the ground, his fear-ridden eyes staring into Cobs' blazing, furious ones.

"You just *had* to disobey the *ONE* time it mattered most, huh?! At the *VERY. LAST. SECOND!* Well now… now you have nowhere to run, P4. Nowhere to *hide."*

He swung the knife directly at Paper, but furiously sliced nothing but air as the robot rolled out of the way with a grunt, staring at his abuser.

Paper didn't know what he was going to do now, even if he survived Cobs' wrath. Didn't know where he was going to go, who he was going to talk to, what kind of help he'd seek out…

But he was *not* about to just… give up and die. No. He wasn't going down without a fight.

He'd live his *life* to the fullest…

For OJ.

-

“Agh… this place again?”

OJ muttered, sitting up in the same bright blue void he’d been greeted with as the last time he ended up dead.

Only this time, it was… a little weirder. It wasn’t as empty as it was before, and other objects kept randomly spawning in right before his eyes.

But maybe this time he’d be able to find *someone*...

“Hello? Is- is anyone here?”

He rose to his feet, walking in a random direction in an attempt to find the rest of the contestants. They had to be around here somewhere, right?

He didn’t manage to get very far before a looming shadow was cast over him, prompting him to turn around as he was met with…

…The hotel. In its entirety, simply standing there before him.

Wow.

He’d never realised how blatantly… self-promotional the building was. It’s completely orange exterior, the massive, eye-catching sign pointing to it with his name written along it, for everyone to see… it was even *shaped* like him, for crying out loud. Maybe he *should’ve* listened when Pickle was trying to give him designer tips…

If he ever got out of this place, he’d surely enlist Pickle in trying to help him design the new building. And Soap too, if she was interested.

Or maybe even… *Paper.* He’d already proven he was such a good co-manager… but what were the chances he would ever even *see* him again?

He slowly stepped towards the building, flinging the door handle open to be greeted with cold, dead silence. The entire room was spotless, almost *shimmering* , as if it were brand new.

He gently opened the fridge, expecting to be immediately yelled at for ‘stealing someone’s stash of sweets’. But there was no noise aside from the quiet click of the fridge door opening… and there wasn’t even anything in the fridge at all, just rows and rows filled with the empty, cool air around him.

It was… somewhat disturbing to him. To see the TV turned off, with no video games stacked beneath it… none of Paintbrush’s paintings hanging on the walls… even the rooms themselves seeming so… so *lifeless*...

He marched up the steps, walking past the dozens of doors lining the hall to find… Paper's room.

He couldn't help but wonder…

He turned the door handle open, expecting to find a room that was virtually spotless like any other.

But before he had the chance to find out, he was suddenly transported to a completely different area. It felt similar to being recovered, but…

"Okay… so *now* is that everyone?"

He turned around to the source of the voice, realising that everyone had regrouped here. Knife, Suitcase, Pickle Soap and Test Tube… pretty much everyone was around.

"Mhm!"

"That's everyone, yeah!"

Cherries shot their father two beaming grins as he stepped away from his recovery icon, and he gladly returned their bright smiles.

"So… when we actually get outta here, what exactly is the plan to kill Cobs and Paper?"

…Huh.

Did he… did he hear Trophy correctly?

"I- I'm sorry, *what?"*

Everyone turned to face OJ as he spoke up, the sudden tense pressure of everyone's eyes on him making him chuckle somewhat nervously.

The group all exchanged worried glances and whispers, many coming from a place of sympathy and pity… only leaving OJ even more perplexed.

Suitcase was the first to actually speak up, walking up to OJ as she lowered his voice ever so slightly.

"OJ… don't you know? Paper was just a robot created to spy on everyone. He even *killed* you…"

OJ's left hand involuntarily curled into a shaking fist, and he used his right one to vaguely gesture to himself and the group.

"Hah… what? That's crazy. Sure, he- he killed me, I know that, but it was against his own will! He didn't actually *want* to… you… you do realise that, right?-"

Soap shook her head with a pitiful sigh, stepping over to OJ and placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Hey… I get it. He was so sweet and innocent, I didn’t want to believe it either. But Cobs had *video footage* of us, OJ… so, so *much* footage of us just living out our normal lives, thinking we were in complete privacy… all from Paper’s point of view.”

“That… that doesn’t prove anything! He still would’ve been sharing it against his will! And besides, are you really gonna listen to *Cobs?* He’s the bad guy here, is he? You shouldn’t trust a word he says!-“

Test Tube sighed, holding some weird-looking light orb in her hands as she approached him too.

“OJ… Cobs lied about a lot of things, yes… but from a logical perspective… Why would Cobs build *you* a robot if he wasn’t just going to use it for nefarious purposes? It doesn’t make sense for him to *offer* to spend his *resources* on something that wasn’t just to secretly benefit him too. He’s a greedy CEO, remember?”

OJ took a step back from her. A step back from all of them, shaking his head firmly as he spoke.

“…No. No, none of you *get* it… none of you understand who Paper really *was.* None of you saw how *alive* and *free* he was… how his trauma at Meeple affected him… how *trapped* he was on the ship- you- you guys don’t-“

Pickle shook his head, placing a hand on OJ’s back in a shallow attempt to comfort him.

“Look, OJ… we’ll… we’ll talk about this outside, okay? I know it can be a lot, finding out someone you cared for was only using you… trust me, I’d know.”

“Paper… he… he wasn’t…”

OJ’s voice trailed off mid-sentence. Could they be right? Was it possible that there was nothing more to Paper than a heartless, really well-developed machine designed to fool them all? To fool *him?*

He… he wouldn’t believe it. *Couldn’t* believe it. Paper wasn’t just some emotionless, corporate monster… he *couldn’t* be.

He couldn’t just… let Paper die…

When they escaped, he’d prove it. They’d kill Cobs, and realise there’d be no reason to take Paper’s life too… they *had* to realise, surely…

“Let’s… just line up at the starting line. OJ, you have to try to outrun it, okay? Images will be projected to distract you, but if we all stay together…”

He zoned out somewhere in the middle of Suitcase’s speech, too distracted by the swirling mess of thoughts in his head, absentmindedly walking with everyone else to the starting line.

And once he heard the buzzer's blare, he was off. He did end up seeing those distracting images, just like she'd said… projections of his life and his experiences…

But nothing he'd ever felt before compared to the drop he felt in his stomach when he first saw *Paper* appearing in his memories, watching himself neglect Paper's wants and needs, over and over and *over*...

And he saw Paper *kill* him again, the scene playing out right before his very own eyes…

He was almost tempted to give up and let himself die. What was even the point, if they were all right? If Paper's innocence and purity was nothing but an illusion?

Although his pace had gradually started to slow… he soon felt a hand slide into his own, pulling him towards the finish…

And saw none other than *Bomb* by his side, giving him a warm, softened smile.

"C-Come on. I-I'm not l-leaving you here."

And while OJ was genuinely grateful for his help, even after all this time and distance from each other… and the smile Bomb offered him was one he returned… he couldn't help but worry about what he'd see when they all finally made it out.

-

Soon enough, everyone was respawned in some sort of bare, open field, with the sun setting in the dull sky behind them. It was somewhat mesmerising, seeing the blues and oranges blend together above them…

…But what really grabbed his attention was Cobs battling MePad, swinging a knife aimlessly at him as he dodged every attempt at a blow he threw at the tablet.

He… hadn't even seemed to notice MePhone or any of the others at *all*... until he turned around and spotted them, laughing along maniacally to himself.

"Oh, look who *finally* decided to show up!"

And then the smile dropped into a scowl as he clenched his blade even tighter.

"And the contestants… they're *STILL* alive?! Well… well that's *fine.* Now you three can watch me rip everyone you ever cared for to *shreds!* Starting with *YOU!"*

OJ saw Cobs spin around to face him, raising the knife as he was about to strike.

He knew he didn't have enough time to react to it and move out of the way.

So he simply braced himself. Braced himself for that feeling of hollow emptiness that always followed him being shattered. Braced himself for the severing of the bond between him and his senses, knowing soon he'd be floating in an endless void with no real connection to reality.

He'd experienced death before… and while the thought of it still scared him, he'd gotten used to how losing his life felt. He was prepared for the sting of pain when he shut his eyes, hands clenched into fists as he waited for the strike that would end his life once more.

But it never came.

Instead, the only thing his senses were met with was the sound of metal scraping against metallic paint, jumbled mesh and wires being destroyed and ripped apart as the blade pierced through the sheet of metal.

And when he opened his eyes… his heart stopped beating completely.

Paper sank to the floor, Cobs' knife lodged firmly into his chest.

Cobs only stared at it in disapproving silence, before his lips curled up into a smile. He pulled out a strange device with a massive red dial on it, cranking it up all the way.

"AAAAAGGHHHHHHH!!!"

Everyone around them was stunned, watching the scene before them with nothing but horror and regret in their eyes.

He'd never heard a scream so raw and intense from Paper in his life, electric sparks flying all over his body as his eyes flashed with errors and warning signs, his body failing to compute the immense amount of *torture* that'd been hurled towards him. And no matter what, it just didn't *stop*...

In fact, it felt like the screeches of agony lasted for *hours,* the entire world falling silent around him as he let out his pain in the only way he could, the sound soon morphing into a glitchy shriek as more and more of his embedded systems were fried or destroyed from the impact.

Until eventually, his remaining systems shut down from the overload all at once, and his eyelids fell shut. His body went completely limp, and Cobs turned the dial back down to zero with a smirk.

"How predictable. Running from death for so long… and all I had to do was threaten the thing he cared about most for him to charge right at it like a bull."

He dropped the device to the ground, crushing it beneath his foot.

OJ let himself fall to his knees, landing right besides Paper, tears already forming in his eyes. A few objects gathered around him, but their apologies and whispered condolences fell upon deaf ears. He lifted Paper's deformed, smashed body onto his knees, pulling the knife out of his chest and feeling for his pulse. Or rather, the quiet, steady whir of machinery that told OJ that at least his inhalation and exhalation systems were still operational. That Paper was at least still *alive.*

There was nothing.

Chapter 15: Factory Reset

Chapter Summary

At long last, the battle between Cobs and the contestants concludes.

Chapter Notes

Well... here we are! The last chapter! Man, it's been a long ride, huh? I'm so thankful for everyone that's joined me over the course of this silly robot fic. All of your support for this AU really means a lot to me and my friends who co-own it.

So without further ado... may the Spark of Hope finale BEGIN!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

OJ couldn't move.

He was absolutely paralysed, frozen in place by what he realised had just happened.

Cobs had *killed* Paper.

He just stared at the remains of the robot on his knees, completely lost in his own agonisingly painful sea of despair.

He didn't even move an inch when Cobs pulled the knife right out of his dead body, holding it firmly in his right hand as if nothing had happened.

"Anyone else want to *join him?"*

He pointed the blade towards Balloon, his smile widening as the object put up no resistance, only backing away from him in fear.

OJ couldn't recall whatever everyone's plan was anymore. They all seemed so *frightened* now, far from the motivated and determined group they were only a few minutes ago. But he barely paid attention to any of them and whatever they were doing.

Because… How could he, considering what had just happened?

How in the world was this *fair?*

After *everything* he and Paper had been through together… all their ups and downs, the times they'd laughed, smiled or cried together… all those times he'd stay up late just thinking about the guy and how *perfect* he was…

He was just… *gone?* Like *that?* Forever nothing but a fleeting memory in his life?

He didn't deserve to die. He was perhaps the last object in the world who did. Why had he given up his life… just to save *him?* The selfish, boring, basic hotel manager? The hotel manager who'd already overcome death more times than he could count?

Paper was one of a kind. A shining beacon of light in the dull darkness of their lives at the hotel. So selfless and sweet, always making sure everyone felt appreciated and cared for, that nobody ever went unnoticed or unseen…

And what did they repay that kindness with?

A plan to *kill* him.

Well, are they *happy* now? Are they going to toss the fact that OJ loved him so much right back in his face? Make fun of him for getting attached to a 'silly robot', and pretend they never got to know him at all?

He'd only just realised that he was shaking as his breathing became thinner and thinner. He felt like he was teetering on the edge of sanity and madness, the line between the two becoming more and more blurry the more time he had to spend living in this reality. The same reality where the only man he'd ever loved, the *one* person who actually *understood* him and made him feel whole and complete… his *other half*...

…Was nothing more than a mess of metal and wires at his feet.

He tried to focus on what was going on around him, he really did.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Cobs pulling Suitcase open, taking whatever was inside of her case into his hands.

Everyone suddenly stopped, waiting for something to happen. Cobs inspected the device, turning it over in his hands…

…Before throwing it to the wind and letting it explode in midair.

"You guys *really* think I'd be dumb enough to take a *bomb?* You've gotta be more creative than that, come on!"

He chuckled at their idiocracy, wiping a tear from his eye. Nobody moved. The air was sharp, tense, and so unbelievably *thick.* It was like listening to a predator hunting its unsuspecting prey.

Until, of course, there was a *shriek.*

The noise made OJ flinch. It was the same noise Paper made whenever he felt overwhelmed back at the hotel.

Cobs bolted towards the source of the noise, practically tearing Box apart to get to the luminous orb of energy they'd failed to hide.

"Oh, you really are all just *morons,* aren't you? Did you *really* think that after all you've been through, and all you've learnt about yourselves, you'd still *win?* How *pathetic,* really!"

The orb wailed again. To OJ's ears, it had never sounded so painful. So *heartbroken.*

And then, practically out of nowhere, an alien ship approached them from the clouds. It was massive, egg-shaped, and seemed so… so *foreign,* unknown and otherworldly.

When it landed onto the ground, practically right in front of Cobs, two glowing light orbs flew around his hands, morphing into chains and cuffing him immediately.

OJ had never seen anyone's expression change so quickly before. From calm, controlled and confident to alarmed and utterly defeated.

He made a few stuttering and sputtering noises struggling in his attempt to break free, as one of the floating egg-aliens came around behind him and shoved him into the ship.

The contestants couldn't help but stare at where he once stood in disbelief. Just as quickly as Cobs had seized power and victory, it had been torn away from his hands.

One of the aliens on the ship - a massive, striped purple egg bearing a crown - approached Fan and Test Tube, seemingly recognising the two objects.

"Thank you, for helping us to retrieve all three of our missing young. Allow us to give you a small portion of our organic energy as thanks."

A very tiny amount of energy floated right in front of Test Tube, and she cupped her hands to receive it.

She stared at the tiny orb in her hands, carefully moving it around as her smile softened ever so slightly.

The entire group all seemed to relax now, completely convinced they could all rest and that the nightmare was finally over.

For OJ, it felt like it had only just begun.

But his eyes stayed focused on Test Tube. He knew what he had to do, what he had to ask of her. And it seems like she knew, too, quickly handing the sample of energy she'd received to Fan and walking over to OJ, crouching down beside him.

"I'll do everything I can. I promise."

"…Please…"

OJ was almost hesitant to let him go, but he knew it would be for the better. He'd do *anything* for even the *slightest* chance that he'd get to see his Paper again.

She motioned for Paintbrush to come over, and the two carried Paper in their arms, rushing off to Test Tube's lab.

He wanted to go with them. To see the process for himself. But he knew he'd likely only distract Test Tube, and that was the last thing he wanted. He needed her to be as focused and precise as possible…

Instead, he got up and started walking off towards the hotel, not caring for whatever the rest of the contestants were doing.

He marched up the stairs to his room, flinging the door open and sitting on the side of his bed as it slammed shut behind him.

It was hard to focus on anything. Hard to keep himself distracted from his thoughts, waiting for each and every second to tick by as Test Tube got to work.

He just kept telling himself that it wouldn't be much longer now. Soon, everything would be okay. It had to be. He didn't know how he'd cope with things if Paper couldn't be fixed. If he was forever doomed to be a busted, beaten-up corpse who'd sustained too much damage to repair…

But after what felt like eons, he heard a knock on his door.

He'd never swung it open faster.

And there she was, carrying his limp body in both hands.

"I… I did everything I could…"

No.

No, no no no *no*...

"You don't mean- he's not-"

"I… I don't *know,* OJ. Again, I fixed everything I could, but… I don't know how exactly to power him on…-"

Wait.

OJ thought back to when Paper had first arrived… the way he simply powered on himself, after a short while. Maybe there was still a *chance*...

"I'll… I'll handle it, okay? Thanks, Test Tube. I appreciate it…"

She nodded, placing him in OJ's arms and leaving the room, mumbling something unintelligible to herself.

OJ propped Paper up against the bed, and *waited.*

Waited for any sort of sign that things would actually be *okay*... After all, he'd waited this long already, anyway.

And then… he saw it.

Paper's eyes flashed a brilliant bright white colour, loading written across the top and bottom of each one with the classic Meeple product loading animation in the centre.

Until the start-up logo appeared, a quiet, triumphant jingle was heard and his eyes faded back to their regular colour… and Paper rose to his feet.

OJ had never experienced such deep *relief* in his entire *life.*

Paper was *okay.* The love of his life was actually *here*... alive, functional, and fully intact. It was… like some sort of *miracle.*

"Paper…"

He let out a joyful, bright chuckle that faded into a deep sigh of relief.

"I- I missed you so much, I thought I lost you forev-"

Paper walked right past him.

What.

He moved in rhythmic, controlled patterns, walking towards the hallway and paying OJ no mind.

"Paper…? Paper, it's me, OJ, c'mon!"

The robot stopped right by the door, completely motionless, seemingly processing his words.

What was going on? Why was Paper ignoring him all of a sudden? Did he do something wrong?

"Please, just talk to me-"

And OJ regretted those words as soon as they tumbled out of his mouth.

The android turned around to face OJ, it's expression so… so *lifeless* and *dead.* It did exactly as he'd requested.

"Hello. I am unit P.4.P.3.R. You must be… Orange… Juice."

And that's when it all hit him. All at once.

Paper… Paper wasn't okay. He was *gone.*

The worst part wasn't even that he clearly didn't remember their time together. Didn't remember their *love,* didn't remember *anything* about what they'd had.

No.

The worst part… was that no matter how hard he looked, he couldn't find the *spark* in Paper's eyes. The same spark he'd seen in Paper all those months ago, the one that told him that Paper had a *soul.* Had a *spirit.* Had a *life.*

The last spark of hope *he'd* been holding onto had completely fizzled out.

"How may I assist you?"

Chapter End Notes

AAAND THAT'S A WRAP!! I hope you enjoyed reading this even a fraction as much as I did writing it. I hope you all stick around to see whatever I come up with next! :)

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...Oh, that? Just ignore it. It's not important.

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